

Malcolm Saville

The Secret of Grey Walls



A LONE PINE
ADVENTURE

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The Secret of Grey Walls

Malcolm Saville

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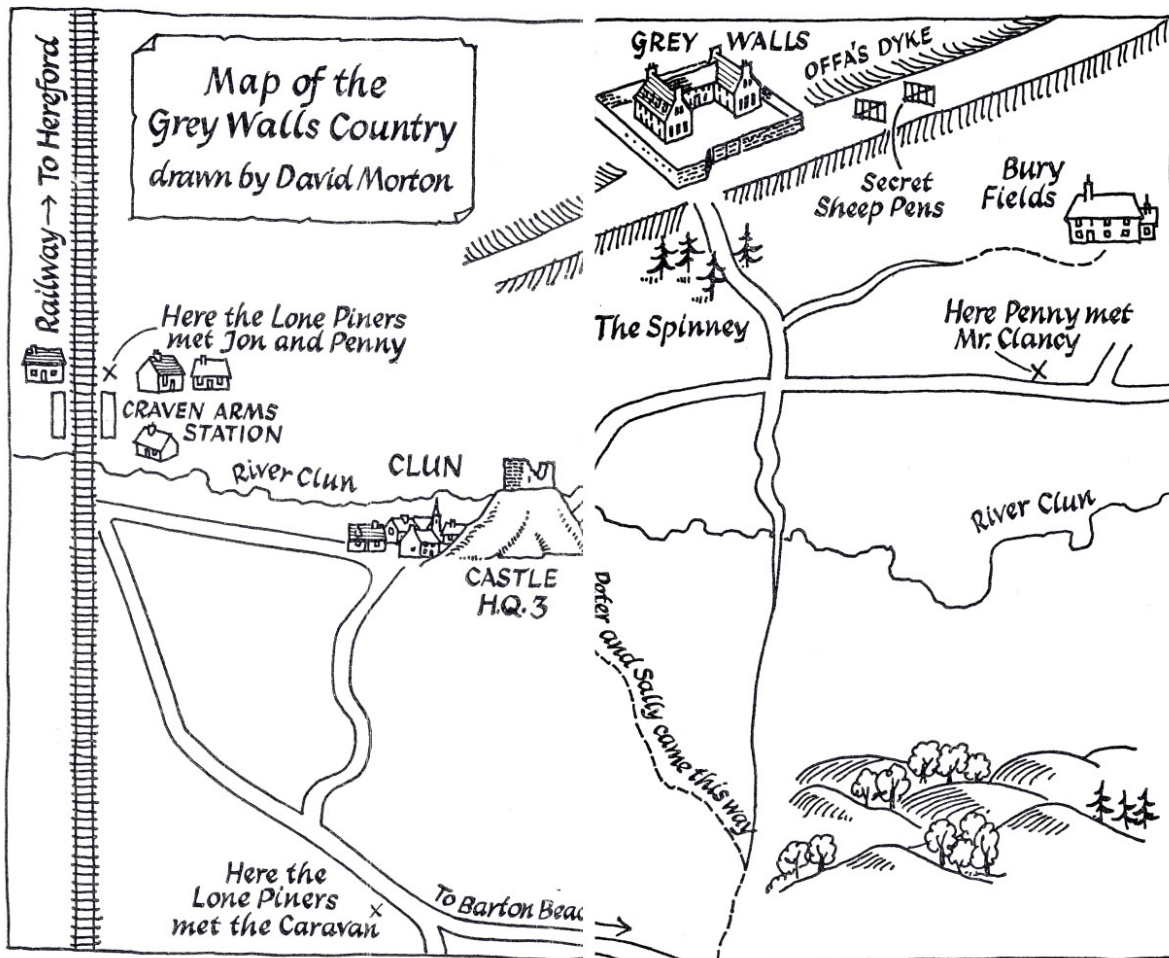
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FOR MY WIFE

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Foreword

*Clungunford and Clunbury, Clunton and Clun,
Are the quietest places under the Sun.*

If you can find a map large enough to show the towns and villages in the counties of Shropshire, Hereford and Radnor, and then study it carefully, you may find for yourself the four villages mentioned in the old rhyme. Clun, the last-named, is the scene of this story.

Look for it this way. First find Shrewsbury on your map and then follow the black railway line south in the direction of Ludlow and Hereford until you come to a strangely-named junction called Craven Arms. Look now for a road leaving this little town and running west - this is the road along which all the Lone Piners, except Peter, travelled on that cold December day on which their adventure started - and follow it until you find, as they did, that Clun might well be the quietest place under the sun.

Clun is the largest of the four places named after the little river which rises over the Welsh border and slips down the valley between the wooded hills by the Craven Arms road.

There seems no particular reason why Clun should exist to-day, but it does, and you can go there for yourself. You can stand on the narrow stone bridge where Penny and the others stood while Alan Denton dashed past them on his bicycle on his way to find Clun's policeman. You can climb the grassy hill up which the twins led the two new members of the Club and stand beside the now crumbling ruins of the castle which was built soon after the Norman Conquest. From here, high above the crowded roofs of Clun town, while the sweet wind sings in your ears, you can look west over wild and rolling country into Wales, which is only a few miles distant. All this land was once a forest.

Offa's Dyke wants some finding, but for many miles it still runs as straight as a rule through the heather.

All this country is rich in history and tradition. Climb Bury Hill and look for the remains of the camps and forts the ancient Britons made; you may be lucky enough, as many others have, to pick up a flint arrowhead. Explore the road that swings up and down hill to the market town of Bishop's Castle and then, another day, try to find an old inn that reminds you of the one to which Mr Cantor took Dickie and Mary.

There is no other place in England quite like hidden, mysterious Clun, but although the castle, the bridge and the river are real enough, you will never find the house called Keep View, nor the farm Bury Fields, and neither, I am sorry to tell you, is there really a mysterious house called Grey Walls. I made all these up and they are as imaginary as the characters you will meet in these pages.

But I hope you will like the children and people you can never actually meet as much as the real Clun and its wild hills if you are ever lucky enough to go there.

I must also explain that this special edition is a little shorter than the original story which was first published in 1947, but the adventure, which I hope you will find exciting, has not been altered.

M. S.

The Lone Pine Club

The Lone Pine Club was founded as a secret society of young friends, at a lonely house called Witchend in a hidden valley of the Long Mynd in Shropshire. The first headquarters of the Club was in a clearing, marked by a solitary pine tree, on the slopes of this valley. The original rules of the Club are very simple and are set out in full in *Mystery at Witchend*, which is the first story about the Lone Piners and was written over twenty years ago. Many readers have asked that the Lone Piners should not grow older from book to book, but as they have now had eighteen adventures - the list is on the last page of this book - it has become necessary to make some of them a little older, and to behave as if, like you, they are living in the 1970's.

There are now nine members of the Lone Pine Club but it is not usual for them all to be featured in each adventure. The following appear in this story and their ages are the same as when *Grey Walls* was first written:

PETRONELLA (PETER) STERLING. Age 16. No mother, brothers or sisters, but lives with her father, who is in charge of a reservoir at Hatchholt, near Witchend. Vice-captain of the Club, and its co-founder, with the captain-

DAVID MORTON. Age 16. Peter's devoted friend, David lives in London with his parents, but they all come to Witchend, their holiday home, as often as they can.

RICHARD (DICKIE) AND MARY MORTON. David's brother and sister are identical, 10 year old twins.

JONATHAN (JON) WARRENDER. A few months older than David. Lives with his widowed mother at the Gay Dolphin Hotel in Rye, Sussex, where he first met the Mortons and shared an exciting adventure with them, and his red-headed cousin-

PENELOPE (PENNY) WARRENDER. A year younger than Jon. Her parents live abroad and in the holidays she too lives at the Dolphin.

TOM INGLES. A Londoner who now lives with his uncle and aunt and works on their farm near Witchend. Age 16 and now becoming reconciled to country life. Quick witted, brave and liked by everyone who knows him - and very particularly by

JENNY HARMAN. Age 15. She lives with her father and step-mother in a village called Barton Beach a few miles from Witchend. She is an only girl, an enthusiastic member of the Club and a loyal friend.

The latest member, who is not featured in this story, is a Londoner called HARRIET SPARROW who is a special favourite of the twins. MACBETH, the Morton's black Scottie, may also be considered a "founder member"!

1. Peter's Dream

This story begins two nights after Christmas in Petronella Sterling's little bedroom high under the roof of Hatchholt, a sturdy little house which takes its name from a nearby reservoir in the windy heights of the Long Mynd in the county of Shropshire.

Peter, as her friends call her, was dreaming - a strangely vivid dream, which was almost more real than reality. She was searching for someone or something very important. She had a feeling of great urgency in this dream. There was something which had to be done and which she was sure nobody could do better than herself, but she struggled in vain to remember what it was.

Then, like the veil of gauze that is raised sometimes before the last scene of a pantomime, Peter began to see the dream country through which she was running. First, she realized that everything around her was cold and grey, but the light was so weird that she could not tell whether it was day or night. Soon, then, she realized that she was stumbling downhill through heather that scratched her legs, towards a little clump of pine trees in a hollow. She turned her head and, with a sudden shock, saw that she was not alone. A few yards to her left a girl of about her own age was running with her, and as Peter looked at her with curiosity, the girl turned towards her and gave her a friendly smile.

Peter was certain that she had never seen her companion before but felt that she also was searching and, in a way, believed that they were perhaps both seeking the same thing. Unlike many dreams Peter found that she had lost the power of speech. So, without words, the two girls ran on down the slope while a bitter wind whistled round them and swayed the branches of the trees in the spinney below. The country was wild and desolate and Peter was sure that she had never seen it before.

At last they reached the trees and stood, still without words, while the strong wind at their backs moaned through the tree tops. For a long minute Peter felt that they were both waiting for something to happen, for suddenly

even the wind died away and the trees around them stood still like silent sentinels. Then the girl at her side broke the spell by stepping forward to where they could see, between the trees, a rough cart-track winding downhill. She clutched Peter's arm and pointed ahead, and suddenly Peter felt that the ugly, grey-walled house in the hollow below them was one of the things for which she had been searching.

What did she want in this strange house? What secret was it keeping from her and why did she feel so strongly even now that she must go down to the big double gates set in the high stone walls to see what else she could discover?

Without a word to each other the two girls left the whispering trees behind them and went on down the cart-track together. And as they went it seemed to Peter that the light was changing, and before they had gone many yards the dream country was bathed in silver moonlight. Another few steps and the sky was flecked with scarlet, and when she turned to look over her shoulder Peter saw that all the moorland behind was on fire. Without either fear or surprise the two girls stood and watched the trees in the spinney flare up like giant torches and then, as the cruel wind swept the flames down towards them and the strange house, Peter woke.

It was very cold. As usual her bedroom window was open, and the curtains were rustling gently in the wind. Her window, under the eaves, faced east and as she turned over and snuggled down in the warm bed, Peter saw that the sun was up and knew that it must be just after eight o'clock. She was just slipping back into sleep again when she heard footsteps on the stairs, and her bedroom door was opened. She sat up in bed.

"Daddy! You've brought me a cup of tea."

Mr Sterling smiled slowly at his daughter over the top of his spectacles.

"So you are awake, my dear... Good morning. And what are you going to do to-day?"

"I'm going to Witchend again for the day. Mrs Morton asked me last night. You don't mind, do you, Daddy?"

"The Mortons are very kind to you, my dear, and if the weather holds you will have a good day. A few more frosts and we shall be able to invite them all to skate on the water here. Breakfast in ten minutes."

When Peter came down the sun was high enough to shine in through the kitchen windows and set all the brass and copper and china plates gleaming. It was David Morton who had once said that the Hatchholt kitchen reminded him of a lighthouse because everything was so bright and clean.

After she had helped her father wash up Peter ran out to find Sally, her pony. Putting her fingers to her mouth, she whistled shrill and clear, and Sally came trotting over to her and nuzzled for the potato or carrot which she knew her mistress was hiding in her pocket. Sally was not a show pony and not even very good looking, but she was faithful, intelligent, and almost tireless in the hill country, and Peter could do anything with her.

When the pony was saddled and tied to the gate-post, Peter ran in for her gloves and two extra jerseys, for although the sun was well up the sky now, it was still bitterly cold. The underneath jersey was as blue as the shirt she always wore with her jodhpurs, but the top jersey with its rolled collar was scarlet. Mrs Morton had knitted this for Peter and given it to her for Christmas.

"When will you be back?" Mr Sterling asked plaintively as his daughter swung into the saddle.

"Not to dinner, Dad... Tea, I expect... Expect me when you see me, and don't worry. 'Bye!"

As she rode down the winding valley she knew so well, she noticed how on one side the bracken glowed golden in the sunshine, while on the other the frost powdered the brittle fronds which still stood in cold shadow. Sally could have picked her way blindfold down the stony track, so Peter let her make her own pace while she flicked back her fair plaits and whistled to greet another lovely day.

One more turn between the enfolding hills and Peter knew she would see the track running off to the right which led to the next valley called Dark

Hollow and thence on to Witchend. As Sally stepped delicately over the brook which just here ran across the path, her ears went forward. Peter checked her own whistle, wondering what the pony had heard. Then she laughed and touched Sally's sides with her heels, as sweet and clear through the still air came the haunting cry of the lapwing... "Peeewit! Peeewit!"

Peter knew whom she would see when they turned the corner.

David Morton was leaning against the gnarled trunk of a hawthorn tree whittling at a stick with a big knife. He looked up and smiled as Peter came into sight.

"Hello, Peter!" he said. "You look like a fire station or a pillar-box! That jersey is terrific."

She laughed, pleased at his noticing, then asked, "What are we going to do to-day? How are the twins?"

"Awful," David replied, answering the last question first as he swung along by her side. "They're much worse since they were separated in term-time..."

"Time we had another adventure, David," she said. "However irritating the twins may be, they're good when we have an adventure... David! We must get Tom and try and fix something up, and we must get Jenny over from Barton Beach before the holidays are over... Do you realize we're nearly half-way through them?"

David nodded. "I know. The club should be doing something. Trouble is that Tom is kept busy and Jenny can hardly get here and back again in a day."

"I know things are difficult for Jenny," Peter nodded, "and you've never liked her much, David, but she is a member. I like her. She's fun, and I believe she'd come over even for a day if we asked her."

"Jenny's all right, I know," David said, "but she either makes me laugh or makes me mad."

"Anyway, let's try and arrange a meeting of the club soon, and if we can't make an adventure perhaps one will happen to us... If not, ask Dickie and Mary to make one for us... They will!"

"I tell you what would be fun, Peter. I wish we could have Jon and Penny Warrender up here for a bit."

"Yes," Peter said without enthusiasm, for she had yet to forget how disappointed she had been to miss the adventure at Rye. (See *The Gay Dolphin Adventure*.)

"Trouble is," David went on quite unaware of Peter's feelings, "that we've no room for them at Witchend, and you can't put them up at Hatchholt, and there's no place where they could stay in Onnybrook... They're keen to join the Lone Piners, and I know you'd like them, Peter."

"I'm sure I should," she said as coldly as before, and then, suddenly sorry for her stupid jealousy, she said, "Let's talk it over with the others and see if there's some way of asking them up here for a week. Your father and mother know Mrs Warrender, don't they?"

They had crossed the Dark Hollow valley now and were within sight of Witchend. Sally automatically turned up a lane.

"Hello, twins," Peter called as she recognized the two figures sitting on the top bar of the gate. "Hi, Mackie."

The Morton twins looked up at the sound of her voice, smiled politely and simultaneously, and then continued in earnest conversation. The black Scottie dog sitting below them wagged his tail as Peter called him a second time, and then sat down with his ears well forward and his head on one side. He looked as if he would have liked to welcome Peter in person, but a word from Mary seated above him kept him still.

Peter rode up to them and David said, "Get down and open the gate for Peter! Buck up!"

"Look who's here, Dickie!" Mary said with an innocent smile.

"It must be Peter," her twin replied. "How did she get here, I wonder?... We were just talking about her, weren't we, twin? Oh, look, Mary... David's been to meet her. *He'd* better open the gate, hadn't you, David?"

"We wondered why you had your breakfast early and hurried off," Mary broke in. "Acksherly we didn't mind because we had two extra sausages, but we do think you should tell us where you are going when you run off like that..." But as David strode towards them they jumped down and fled from his wrath with Macbeth at their heels.

Peter slipped from the saddle as David opened the gate for her, looped Sally's reins over the hook in the gate-post and walked over to greet Mr and Mrs Morton, who were sitting in the porch.

Mrs Morton smiled at them both. "What are you going to do to-day? You're staying to lunch, anyway, aren't you, Peter?"

"We thought of going down to Ingles and seeing if Tom could get the day off," David said. "It seems too good a day to stay at home, doesn't it? We're rather hoping something will turn up, Father."

Mr Morton nodded towards the gate.

"Here comes your adventure," he smiled, "for here's the postman. Every unopened letter is a mystery and may be an adventure, too... Let's see what he's got for us this morning...' Morning, George - how are you?"

"Nicely, thank you," the old man replied as he leaned his bicycle against the open gate and walked across to him. "Not many for you this morning, though there's one from London... and there's one for old Agnes, too... Good morning, all," and he ambled back to his cycle and pedalled away without knowing that he had brought two letters which were to change the Christmas holidays for all the members of the Lone Pine Club.

"Agnes, here's a letter for you," Mrs Morton called, as their beloved housekeeper came to the door.

"For me?" She took the letter gingerly. "But it can't be for me! There'll be someone having a joke with me and sending me a letter. Maybe it's those two young limbs? They did it once before on Valentine's Day, I remember!"

"Why not open it and see?" Mr Morton smiled, and then caught sight of his wife's face as she read the letter which had come from London. Peter noticed also and strolled over to the stream, realizing that other people's letters were no business of hers.

David soon joined her.

"Something has happened, Peter," he said glumly; "I'm sure of it... They're both looking worried."

Then the twins appeared.

"I say," Dickie began, "what do you think? Something's up... Agnes has got a letter in the kitchen and she looks as if she's crying."

"And Mum and Dad have got another one," Mary broke in, "and they just turned us out of the room when we strolled in, and they're talking like anything."

"Well, we shall soon know," David said, "because here comes Father, and he looks grim."

"Don't go away, Peter," Mr Morton called as he came over to them. "We count you one of the family, anyway... And don't look so worried, David. Nothing very desperate has happened, but it looks as if your mother and I will have to go to London for a little while... There is no getting out of it. But you mustn't let this spoil your holidays. Agnes will look after you all, but you must promise - specially you twins - to make everything as easy as you can for her... Promise, Dickie? Word of honour, Mary?"

The twins nodded.

"Are you sure something hasn't happened to Agnes, too?" Dickie asked. "She was crying when we came through the kitchen."

"I think there's a crisis," Mary said tersely.

She was right, for suddenly through the open door came the sound of loud lamentation, and then Mrs Morton's voice saying:

"Now, Agnes, please don't make such a fuss. I'm sure the news isn't as bad as it sounds, and, anyway, Mr Morton can take you over in the car to-day to see your sister, and then you can talk things over together and make your plans."

"But the little 'uns," Agnes cried. "How can I go away and leave them and you going off to Lunnun an' all just at this very time? I canna' go... and yet I must..."

Even Mr Morton was startled at this outburst, but at last Mrs Morton came out and smiled at their glum faces.

"Fetch some chairs out of the shed, David," she said, "and let's all sit in the porch and have a council of war."

"What's happened to Agnes, Mummy? That's what we want to know," Dickie said.

But not until they were all sitting round Mrs Morton did she tell them what they all wanted to know.

"I can see that your father has told you that we've both got to go to London for a few days. Of course, we shouldn't mind leaving you here with Agnes, but unfortunately she has had some worrying news, too. I didn't know before, but she has a sister who keeps a small guest-house at a place called Clun, which is somewhere down north of Ludlow by the Welsh border. Her letter this morning was from this sister who has to go into hospital at once for an operation, and she wants Agnes to go over and look after the house for her while she is away. Poor Agnes wants to help her sister and wants to help us, too, as she always does, particularly as I told her about our visit to London before she told me her news..."

"Now, I don't quite know what we are going to do, but I've promised that Daddy shall take Agnes over to Clun to-day, and I'm afraid we shall have to split you all up and close Witchend until we get back..."

"We've got a good idea," Mary said suddenly. "At least I think we have... You say it, twin."

"I was only going to ask how many live in this guest-house at that place with a funny name. I mean, how many are living there *now*" Dickie said.

Mary laughed. "Of course! We get all the ideas. We'll all go and live with Agnes and help to cheer her up," and before anyone could stop her she ran into the house.

Mr Morton looked across at his wife and shrugged his shoulders, but before he could speak his daughter re-appeared dragging Agnes by the hand.

"How would I know, my pet?" the latter was saying. "But it's just like your darling kind heart to think of old Agnes and want to come and keep her company... But just let me look at the letter again..."

"Don't take any notice of Mary, Agnes," Mrs Morton said. "You ought to know by now that they both say the craziest things. Of course, you mustn't think of the children coming to Clun with you."

But Agnes was not even listening. Her glasses were crooked on her nose as she turned the pages of her letter.

"There now!" she said triumphantly, raising her head and smiling round at all the tense faces. "The child was right after all, for here it is in black and white. My sister says that there is nobody else in the house now, but she won't be lying easy in hospital if the place be closed up..."

Agnes turned to Mrs Morton.

"I'd be right glad and happy to have them all with me, for there's other help in the house she says, and this maybe will solve all your worries while you're away."

Mary, with shining eyes, swung round to face Peter.

"And you're to come, too, Peter... Of course you must... We won't go without her, will we, David? I'll come with you and ask Mr Sterling, but, of course, he'll be glad for you to go."

"It will be a real Lone Pine holiday," Dickie interrupted. "Let's ask Tom to come, too."

"And Jenny," Mary said.

"And the Warrenders from Rye," came from David quickly. "We could ask them now. Just the chance we wanted... Would there really be room for us, Agnes, do you think? You know we wouldn't be any trouble..."

"Nonsense, David," Mr Morton interrupted. "It's no use discussing it. We can't possibly saddle Agnes with the lot of you. You'll have to split up. Bad luck in the holidays, but we'll all have to make the best of it."

But Agnes had now made up her mind.

"It'll be a bit of company that I'll be needing over there in that great barn of a house, and who better than these I know and who know old Agnes... and the other two that David mentioned. Let them be asked as well, for I've no doubt there's room for all and it'll be a kindness to my sister for the house to be full after Christmas, and a great help to her with her operation and all..."

This last appeal was very cunning, and it was easy to see that Mr Morton was impressed. Meanwhile, Mary squeezed Agnes's hand and murmured, "You're wonderful, Agnes dear. We'll all come with you."

And after more discussion it was settled that if Agnes found when she got to Clun that there was room for them all, and that if she had enough help in the house, and that if her sister had no objection, then they could go. It was also agreed that Tom, Jenny and the two Warrenders could be asked to join them.

Everyone seemed happier when the decision had been made, but Peter was worried about leaving her father.

"You could telephone him daily," David reminded her.

"I know I could, but he hates the 'phone."

"I'll write to your father, Peter," said Mrs Morton, "and you can take the note when you go back this afternoon. Daddy and Agnes won't be home until dark, but why don't you all go and see Tom now and get your letters written ready for posting first thing in the morning? I shall have to write to Mrs Warrender, and, I suppose, to Jennys parents, too."

"I've got a better idea than that," David said. "As soon as Dad gets back and we know it's all right for us to go we'll go down to Onnybrook and telephone. Jenny Harman's shop is on the 'phone, and I've got the number of the *Gay Dolphin* in Rye..."

Mrs Morton disappeared into the house to start her letters and the twins turned on David and Peter.

"Can't you even say thank you?" Dickie began. "Can't you see what a marvellous idea we made?"

" 'Course, we're sorry for Agnes and her sister," Mary continued, "but I wouldn't be surprised if we don't have an adventure in that Clun place. Would you, twin?"

"We have to think of everything," Dickie went on, "and it makes us exhausted. Partikerly when you two just don't say 'thanks' when we have the ideas... Oh, well! If you don't want to say anything you needn't."

"We'll go and tell Tom all about it," Mary said. "We like Tom. He's nice."

"He's got manners. He says 'thank you'," and the two of them sauntered as one, with Macbeth between them, through the gate and along the lane towards Ingles' Farm.

David laughed. "Let 'em go, Peter. We'll cut round by the corner of the wood. It's all working out isn't it?"

Peter nodded. "Sounds fun. Will you mind if I take Sally if we can go? I'd love to ride her over there, although I should have to start earlier than you. You know, David, it was a good idea of the twins. They do get them sometimes. Do you think the Warrenders will come?"

"Sure of it. Nothing will stop Penny if she makes up her mind to it. She's red-headed."

"So you said before," Peter said. "I'm sick of hearing about it. Let's go and find Tom."

They followed the twins up the lane and had not gone very far before they heard the throb of a tractor.

"Bother! I'd forgotten for the minute," David said, "but, of course, Mr Ingles is threshing to-day, so Tom will be busy. I believe they started yesterday and should be through to-night... Let's go and see."

They found the twins sitting in their favourite position on the top bar of Mr Ingles' farmyard gate, watching the thresher and its gang at work. They saw Tom on the top of a stack, flinging sheaves of corn on to the moving band of the elevator. He raised a hand in salute and grinned before going back to his work.

"No use waiting here for Tom," Peter said after a little. "Let's go and see Mrs Ingles and ask her first."

This was an excellent idea, for within a very few minutes of their surprise visit to the kitchen Mrs Ingles had agreed to persuade her husband to let Tom go away for a week. When Mrs Ingles made up her mind that something was going to happen, it *did* happen, and so when Tom came in for his dinner his aunt had already had ten minutes with Mr Ingles, and the matter was settled so quickly that Tom could hardly believe it. As soon as he had finished his meal he went out into the sunshine and found the others.

"All O.K.," he called as he closed the door. "I can come... Who had this brainwave?"

Dickie and Mary looked down modestly at their shoes until their silence was the most obvious answer.

"I'll walk back with you," Tom went on. "Threshing won't start again for ten minutes. Tell me all the news."

So they told him the full story of their idea for getting all the Lone Pine Club members together under one roof and introducing two new members as well.

"And there's Jenny, Tom," Peter said. "What about her? Do you think her father will let her come?"

"I'm not going if Jenny can't come," Tom said stoutly, "Let's telephone her to-night like you said. And if your mother sends a letter to Mr Harman, he'll let her go... Now I must cut back... Pick me up on your way down to Onnybrook tonight, will you, David. Cheerio!"

As soon as he was out of sight they heard the clear lament of the peewit's cry, which Peter answered.

Dickie, who was in front kicking a pebble down the roadway, turned and said, "Are you grateful to us now, you two selfish beasts?"

"Perhaps we will be to-night about six, when Father gets home." David laughed.

"Nearly six hours still to go, and I shan't know because I must get home before dark," Peter sighed. "How can you let me know, David?"

"Telephone you, too, you chump. After we've spoken to Rye and Barton Beach... Buck up, you two midgets. I want my dinner... Afterwards we might go up and have a look at the camp, and maybe light a fire."

"That's all very well," Peter said, "but I wish I knew what was happening at Clun - if they've got there yet. It all seems too good to be real..."

"I like it," Dickie said as he opened the gate of Witchend. "It's a holiday in a holiday."

2. Penny Makes a Friend

On the same evening that the Lone Piners met at Witchend the moon was silvering the huddled roofs of the town of Rye. There was no wind and the great wooden signboard of the *Gay Dolphin* inn, which stands at the end of Traders' Street, hung straight and still over the archway leading into the yard. Mrs Warrender, the owner of the hotel, was sitting in her dining-room with her son Jonathan and her niece Penelope when the telephone rang.

"I'll go," Jon said, "but it's probably for you, Mother."

The telephone was in the dark little hall outside the dining-room, and as Jon left the door open the other two could hear every word he said. At first Penny paid no attention, then, as she heard Jon's astonished voice say, "Not David *Morton*?... David Morton from Witchend?... Gosh, David! How are you? What's wrong?" she jumped from her chair and ran into the hall.

"Give it to me, Jon," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Give it to me. Let me speak to David."

"SHUT UP, Penny!" Jon yelled, and then back into the receiver, "So sorry, David! It's Penny hopping about here... Go on... Tell me again... How marvellous!... I don't see why we shouldn't... and your mother is writing, and so are you?... Grand!... Day after to-morrow?... Why not?... Sooner the better... SHUT UP, PENNY... How are the twins?... Good!... All right, David... We'll send a telegram to-morrow after Mother gets Mrs Morton's letter... See you soon... 'Bye."

When he put the receiver down and turned round Penny flew at him.

"You beast, Jon! Why *are* you so horrible to me? Why didn't you let me speak to him? What is it? What does he want? Why did he ring up? Don't stand there saying nothing, Jon. *Answer me.*"

"How can I answer you when you never stop talking?"

Then he looked down at her, pretended not to notice the hurt look in her eyes, and pushed her gently into the room before him.

"What's all that, Jon?" his mother asked. "It sounds exciting."

John pulled his chair round to Penny's side of the table and sat down next to her.

"It is. That was David Morton, and they want us - Penny and me - to go up in a day or two and join them and their friends at some place in Shropshire for a holiday... I couldn't understand it all, for he sounded a long way off, but Mrs Morton has written to you."

Penny jumped up and hugged her aunt. "Say we can go. Don't hesitate - don't say but and if - don't worry, 'cos we'll be all right... PLEASE let us go, whatever it's all about!..."

Mrs Warrender disentangled herself.

"What did he say, Jon? Just tell me again."

Two mornings later Jon and Penny began their exciting journey from Rye station.

It was still dark as they stood on the platform waiting for the six-thirty morning train and Jon laughed down at his cousin.

"Thrilled, aren't you, Newpenny?"

"You know you're as excited as I am, Jon, only you just pretend not to show it... Here's the train... You bring the bags and I'll find a carriage."

"I wonder what this place Clun is like," said Jon, once they were comfortably settled in an empty compartment. "I like going to fresh places, don't you, Penny?"

He took David Morton's letter from his pocket, and although they had both read it several times already, they turned the pages again as the train roared along through the wintry dawn towards London.

"... Rather good fun for us all to go together to a new place," they read, "and although Clun is not really very far from here it's odd that we've never been... It's no use expecting Agnes to explain, of course. Did we tell you about Agnes when we were at the *Dolphin* in the summer? She's our housekeeper and has lived in Shropshire all her life. She's a funny old soul, but we're all very fond of her... Of course, we're to help Agnes, but as far as we can discover she'll only have to look after her sister's house for her while she is in hospital. It's called - the house, I mean - Keep View, and she says that's because Clun has a very old castle now in ruins and practically only the keep now stands...

"I'm looking forward to you meeting the others - Peter, Tom and Jenny. We're all going on our bikes if it's not raining, except Peter, who insists on riding Sally. Anyway, have a good journey, although I'll bet you'll be sick of trains by the time, you get to Craven Arms where we'll meet you. I hope you remembered to send your bikes on by passenger train, because they ought to be waiting for you at the station. We'll manage about your luggage somehow."

Penny raised her red head.

"He thinks of everything, doesn't he, Jon? It was good of him to write as well. This really is a thrill."

They sat back and watched the countryside change. The fields and hedges were far behind them now for they were roaring through the sprawling suburbs. Station after station with crowded platforms flashed by, and soon even the suburbs were passed and they were riding high over the roofs of south London. Other people who had got into the compartment reached for their coats and luggage and then the train slowly crossed the muddy Thames and slid into Charing Cross.

Outside the station they stood in a queue for a taxi. The morning was dull, grey and damp, and it seemed as they waited that everybody in London was

surging round them and rushing out into the busy Strand. The air was thick with petrol fumes and noise.

Penny wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"I hate it," she said. "Once I thought I liked London when we had to live near it, but now I hate it. It's not as real as Rye or country places. Everyone here rushes about... Oh, Jon! Look! What a marvellous dog."

They were now in the front of the queue, and as a taxi drew up Jon looked over his shoulder and saw a slim collie dog standing close to a man in a raincoat and a brown cap.

"Where to?" the taxi-driver called.

"Paddington, please," Jon said as he opened the door and flung in the rucksacks. As Penny got in, the man with the dog stepped out of the queue and smiled at them.

"I wonder if you'd mind me sharing with you?" he said slowly. "I heard you tell him Paddington, and I've got to get there, too... And besides," he added, "I reckon I don't know London, and what I do know I hates and my dog don't like it either."

Penny beamed at him.

"Of *course*," she said. "We'd love you to come, wouldn't we, Jon?... I noticed your dog just now and thought she looked very sad, and I was just that minute saying to my cousin here that I don't like London either, so, you see... Ow! That was your elbow, Jon! You are clumsy."

Jon looked grim as he helped the man in with his suitcase but Penny went on talking just the same.

"Do tell me your dog's name. I think she's marvellous."

When the stranger smiled he looked very nice. His face was brown, his hair under his cap was fair and his eyes were grey. When he spoke his accent was soft and unusual.

"I've only had her a few days," he said. "She's a sheepdog and a gift to me from my uncle down south."

After that he did not seem inclined to say any more, and although Penny made one or two attempts to make him talk again she had not succeeded by the time they reached Paddington. All she discovered was that the dog's name was "Lady." Almost before the taxi stopped the stranger thanked them, paid his share of the fare, and disappeared with his dog and his bag into the crowd in the booking hall.

"I think he was nice, but shy," Penny said as she got out.

"Nobody could accuse *you* of being shy," Jon retorted. "I blush for you."

"Then I should think that I'm the only thing that could do that" said Penny, walking off with her head in the air.

They got on to the platform just as their train came in, and a friendly porter indicated the Shrewsbury section.

At last they started on the second stage of their journey. The other people in the compartment were not very interesting, neither did they seem to be interested in the Warrenders and this depressed Penny, who, after a while, went to sleep. The journey was not even very exciting to Jon, who was a train enthusiast - or train maniac, as Penny sometimes called this particular interest of his.

Just before they stopped at Birmingham, the steward announced lunch and Jon, as if he did this sort of thing every day, led Penny into the restaurant car. They were put at a table for four and Jon was studying the menu - when Penny, at his side, nudged him violently and said, "Hello! Fancy seeing you again!... And you've brought Lady, too. What fun!"

Jon looked up and recognized their companion of the taxi as he slipped into the seat opposite. He looked much nicer without his cap and raincoat, but seemed worried.

"Don't notice Lady," he whispered. "I'm going to hide her under the table because they didn't want me to bring her in."

"Didn't want you to bring her in?" Penny whispered sympathetically. "The brutes? You couldn't possibly leave her, could you? I mean I couldn't ever be parted from such a dog."

For the first time the man regarded them with some interest.

"Of course, I couldn't leave her, and I've got to eat... But don't either of you mention her again, and maybe we'll get away with it. Depends on who comes into this other seat..."

When a fat man squeezed into the empty place Penny slid her hand under the table and patted the collie's head. She felt her move under the caress and then a warm, damp tongue licked her hand in appreciation. The soup came then, and the fat man settled down to it noisily, while Lady, under the table, stayed still.

After a long pause Jon said, "Funny we didn't see you on the platform at Paddington. Are you going far?"

"Home, thank goodness," the man smiled. "I don't like the south really, and I like London less. Where are you going?"

"We've got to change at Shrewsbury," Penny said eagerly. "And then we're going to a station that doesn't sound real to me because it's called Craven Arms, and from there we're going to a mysterious place called Clun... We've never been before. Have you heard of it?"

"Of course I've heard of it. I live near there. Why are you going to Clun in winter? Nobody comes to Clun except some odd people in the summer who dig about for flint arrowheads on the hills."

Penny's eyes widened.

"There you are, Jon! I always knew this holiday was going to be thrilling, and now, almost before we've started, this has happened. Now this

gentleman... Please tell us your name because this is going to be fun. I'm Penny Warrender, and this is my cousin Jon."

"I'm Alan Denton, and I'm a sheep farmer."

The fat man pushed his plate away from him and now seemed inclined to enter the conversation. Penny did not like the look of him and was afraid that Lady might take a dislike to his fat knees also and make a scene. Alan Denton looked anxious, too, for it was essential that the stranger should leave the table first. So as the waiter came down the narrow gangway, he turned to Penny and said, "I hope you two will take coffee? Have it with me, will you, and then perhaps you can tell me why you are coming to Clun and I'll tell you something about the place in exchange?"

While saying this he winked slowly and then looked meaningly at the fat man, who was now lighting a large cigar. It was a cigar with a very strong smell, and Penny felt Lady tremble as the fumes troubled her sensitive nose. The coffee was poured next, and suddenly the fat man spoke. He had an absurdly small voice,

"I think there's something strange under this table," he piped. "I shall call the steward... Have *you* anything under the table, child?" to Penny, who for once was stricken with fear into silence.

Jon spoke up. "We've only got our rucksacks under there, sir. Sorry if they're in the way, but we didn't like to leave them in the compartment. We're going as soon as we've finished our coffee."

Before the stranger could answer Penny recovered.

"I'm most *frightfully* sorry," she said with wide eyes. "I'm absolutely ashamed of myself, but I'm afraid that cigar makes me feel sick. Cigars always make me feel ill, and now I just couldn't move, *whatever* happened... I'm so sorry..." She put her hands to her face and lowered her head as if in pain.

Jon had the sense to look alarmed, while Alan Denton merely looked astonished. But the fat man, after a quick glance at Penny's now shaking

shoulders, beckoned the steward, paid his bill and waddled away.

Jon nudged his cousin.

"All right. You can recover now. He's gone."

"Don't you really like cigars?" Denton asked gravely, and then smiled as Penny burst out laughing. "That was a smart way of getting rid of him, anyhow. Let's pay our bills and go... Maybe there's room in my carriage now, and perhaps you two would like to come in with me?"

As soon as the steward had turned his back they slipped out into the corridor, where Lady wagged her tail as Penny stroked her ears. There was much more room in Denton's carriage, so the Warrenders brought their luggage along and settled down opposite to him.

"Hope you don't mind a pipe?" he smiled at Penny. "Now tell me why you're coming to Clun."

Jon glared so fiercely at Penny that for once she remained silent, while he told their new friend briefly that they were joining some old friends from another part of Shropshire and going to stay together at Keep View.

"Do you know that place?" he went on. "It's a sort of boarding house, isn't it?"

Denton nodded.

"Yes... Nice old soul runs it, but I can't just recall her name... I still can't understand why you're all coming to the place now... What made you choose Clun?"

Somehow Jon did not feel inclined to tell him what little he did know of the reasons for their visit, so he countered this by asking:

"But you tell us something about it. That's what we want to know. Have you always lived there?"

"Bury Fields our place is called, but 'tis three miles or more from Clun. We've been rearing sheep on those hills since William the Conqueror's time, maybe. We don't go to Clun so often really. The Castle - Bishop's Castle is its real name - and Knighton are bigger towns for shopping and the like."

"But what's Clun *like*?" Penny demanded. "I've tried and tried to imagine it but I can't..."

Denton scratched his head and then pointed out of the window as the train slowed down.

"I'll try in a minute... This is Wellington and you're in Shropshire now. See that smooth-looking mountain? That's the Wrekin and every Shropshire man knows that... Now you want to know what Clun is like... Funny, but it's difficult to explain something you takes for granted, but I should know I s'pose for I've seen it and been told about it often enough.

"First of all, then, Clun is just a little town that seems to ha' been forgotten although 'tis said that it stands on one of the old coaching roads from Wales into England..."

"But the castle?" Penny interrupted. "How old is it? Can you go in it? Has it got secret passages?"

"Steady! Not so fast! 'Tis funny, but I don't mind ever being told a lot about the castle and though I've seen it all my life I reckon I must take it for granted. I believe 'twas built in Stephen's reign... It's just bits o' the keep that you can see standing on the hill now... But you'll soon see that for yourselves. Then we've got a river called Clun and a fine old bridge over it though 'tis much too narrow now."

He took his pipe from his mouth and looked out of the window for a long minute.

"But you can't explain it," he said at last. "Reckon you've got to feel it. 'Tis not the town but the hills and the country round about where I live that make the place something to remember... They say some o' the first men in England lived in the hills round Clun, and you can pick up the flint

arrowheads they made to-day... There are hills all round Clun, and this is the country I know for 'tis mine and where our sheep are bred... Once it was all forest... From the tops o' our hills you can see other hills - the Long Mynd over Stretton way, the Stiperstones and over to the south the Black Mountain, in Wales."

He paused again, and after a little Penny said, "Tell us about your farm... And may we come and see you?"

Alan smiled, and the faraway look that had been in his eyes when he talked about the hills round his home disappeared.

"Of course you can! Come when you like and welcome - if you can find us! There's only Mother and me now though we're hoping to get some more help." He turned to Jon. "Are you interested in sheep? D'you know about 'em?"

Jon shook his head.

" 'Fraid not. But we'd like to see yours."

"Every penny we've got is in our sheep... We reckon Dad built up the finest flock for miles around and now 'tis my job to keep it so... Come and see us and bring your friends with you."

"What did you say your farm was called?" Penny asked.

"Bury Fields."

"Why? It's a peculiar name."

"I suppose 'tis... Dad told me once it must be because we're right near one of those burying places where you can dig up bones and ashes and the like if you've time."

"Thank you very much for making it all so exciting," Penny smiled. "I'd - we all would - like to come and see you and your mother and your sheep, and Lady too."

"Maybe we'll meet again then," Denton said as he reached for his luggage. "We're running into Shrewsbury now and I'll have to say Cheerio for I've to do something in the town and can't catch your connection... And many thanks for the lift in the taxi and for helping me to hide Lady."

Penny stroked the dog's head as the train glided alongside the long platform.

Alan opened the door.

"Just look after Lady for me till I'm out with my baggage... Right! Thank you... So long, kids, and I hope we'll meet again."

"So do I," Penny said, and then, under her breath, "I think he's absolutely smashing."

Jon looked at her coldly.

"Come on," he said. "We've got forty minutes if that clock is right, so we'll buy some chocolate."

But Penny was still gazing after Alan and Lady and did not seem to hear him.

3. The Caravan

Mist hung low in the Witchend valley long after the darkness of the winter night had fled. The stillness of the hills was broken only by the murmur of the little brook which ran so cheerfully down through the heather until it broadened into a pool before the front door of the house, dashed on again through a narrower channel under the stone wall, and then slid down the side of the lane that led to Ingles Farm.

As the front door of Witchend opened, Dickie and Mary came out. The twins were warmly dressed in trousers, sweaters and anoraks and Macbeth followed them a little way and then went back and sat in the porch. He knew that something was going to happen soon and did not want to be left behind. With his head on one side he watched the twins until they disappeared round the corner of the house in the direction of the shed where the bicycles were kept. Then David appeared, patted the little dog and said:

"Yes. You're coming, old boy. But you won't like the journey much." He raised his voice. "Where are you, twins? Buck up with the bikes else we shall be late."

The twins reappeared with their bicycles.

"Are your tyres hard?" David asked sternly. "Have you got your pumps and puncture sets?"

Dickie looked aggrieved.

"Why do you speak to us like that, David? You're always picking on us. I'll bet that we'll be the ones that make no trouble at all."

"I remember the time that you got a puncture, David," Mary added, "and anyway I think you're the one who ought to blow up our tyres... You're so big and strong...And now please don't interrupt any more because I've got to get Mackie's basket ready..."

The basket was duly fixed to the carrier, and as they tightened the straps the sun came up over the tops of the pine trees above the house and swirled some of the mist away. David, whistling cheerfully, came back with his cycle and laughed at them.

He was ignored.

Then their parents came out, and Mrs Morton said:

"Are you really sure you're going to be all right, twins? Are you certain it's not too far for you?"

"It's very strange," their father remarked, "that whenever we want you to walk or cycle anywhere for us you always say it's too far, or you're too tired, and can't we go in the car! You could all have come in the car yesterday when I took Agnes and your luggage over to Clun, but now you want to cycle! I think you're all crazy! Take care of 'em, David. We'll ring up Keep View from London tonight to see if you've arrived safely, but I know we can trust you."

"You can, Dad, I promise," David said. "Are you ready twins? I bet Tom is waiting for us and as we've got to meet Jenny we shall mess up the whole programme if we're late."

Mr Morton opened the white gate for them as they called good-bye, and pedalled off down the lane.

"Whistle the call, David," Dickie shouted over his shoulder. "I bet Tom will answer,"

Soft, yet piercingly clear, David whistled the peewit's lament. Once, twice - and yet again the lonely little cry echoed down the lane and then, softer yet, came the reply and they knew that Tom had heard them.

"You're late," he said as they cycled up to the farmyard gate. "I've been up for hours." Then he laughed good-humouredly and so the cavalcade started again, with David and Tom leading the way.

Partly because they had planned to meet Jenny as soon as they could and partly because David felt that it would be wiser too to avoid the main road, he had chosen a rather roundabout route through lanes and over wild country. They had plenty of time before meeting the Warrenders at Craven Arms and he had been sure that the twins would keep going if they did not have to hurry and if they could have some good rests.

Once or twice David had to stop to consult his map. It was as well that he had allowed plenty of time because, after two experiments, Mary refused to ride her bicycle down any hills.

Even Dickie was surprised.

"You're just crackers," he said. "Down hills is the best part of all biking 'cos it's like flying... You always used to like going downhill, Mary. What's wrong?"

"You great stupid," Mary stormed at him. "Can't you see that it's Mackie? Every time I go downhill I go fast. Every time I go fast I bump. Every time I bump my poor darling is TORTURED AND TERRIFIED... You can all jolly well go on your own way. I don't care. I'll catch you up if I want to - and not unless!" she gulped.

"You're just not going for a bike ride at all," Dickie muttered. "All you're doing is to take your bicycle for a walk and give it some fresh air. You walk it up hills and now you walk it down hills too, it just doesn't make sense."

"Dickie!" Mary gasped. "I just can't believe it's you talkin'!... I'll wake up any minute now. You must be ill to go against me like that... Dickie!"

This discussion took place at the top of a long hill, and even David and Tom were silenced by Mary's wide-eyed horror of her twin's desertion.

Dickie began to fidget with his bicycle bell.

"Oh, well," he muttered after a horrible pause, "you don't want to get in a state over a bit of a joke, do you? 'Course I understand about Mackie... What other people round here forget, Mary, is that we've all sworn in blood

as members of the Lone Pine Club that we'll always be kind to animals... We have, haven't we?"

"Well, Dickie, *we* didn't forget, but some people did, and I think it's jolly clever of you to remember that," Mary said in a more normal manner.

"An' there's another thing, twin... You know that joke I made just now about taking bikes for a walk?"

Mary nodded dismally.

"Well, if you and me *want* to take our bikes for a walk on this trip, I don't see why we shouldn't! I mean it's our holiday just as much as the others, however much they try and boss us about, isn't it, twin?"

Mary smiled cheerfully, for this was her real beloved Dickie again.

"O'course it is, Dickie..."

"That's all right, then," Dickie concluded triumphantly. "So now we'll *both* push our bikes down this hill and Mackie can walk... Come on, twin! I reckon David and Tom have had enough rest now!" And with that they set off down the road with Macbeth trotting between them.

"Let them get well ahead," David said with his hand on Tom's sleeve. "It's no use fussing... Let them get on and then we shan't have to talk to them."

"That doesn't matter," Tom muttered. "I don't mind not talking to them when they're in this mood. Trouble is they never stop talking *to* us or *at* us... Anyway, I'm not walking down hills for anybody. I'll go on to Crown Farm, and if Jenny's not there yet I'll go along some of the way and meet her... Wait for us, David, if we're not there. So long!" and he jumped on his bike and whizzed down the hill.

With a wry smile David noticed that the twins did not even look up when Tom passed them.

At the foot of the hill Mackie was lifted into his basket and the three Mortons cycled on together. Their lane wound steadily up-hill for another

mile and then the hedges stopped and they found themselves coming to open moorland. David pointed ahead.

"See those buildings? That should be Crown Farm and a cross-roads, and that's where Jenny is supposed to meet us. Can you see her, Dickie? You're the chap with sharp eyes in this family."

Dickie strained ahead and then stood on the pedals.

"Yes!" he shouted triumphantly. "I can see her, I think. She's standing by the signpost, and Tom's with her... Up the Lone Piners!"

"Hold tight, Mackie darling," Mary implored as she accelerated. "We're going to bump a bit."

Jenny had recognized them now and waved frantically in welcome.

"She's done well," David said as he waved back. "Wonder if Tom had to go far to meet her... We'll pitch our first camp here and have something to eat. Wonder how Peter is getting on?"

"She'll be all right," Mary said. "I 'spect she's having all sorts of adventures by herself... I think she's the only one of us all that doesn't mind being by herself, don't you?"

David had no time to agree that this was a very wise remark, for now they had reached the cross-roads where Jenny was waiting to welcome them.

"D'you know, David, that I *really* was here first? I was here before Tom even, and he told me that he'd hurried on specially. It was your map that did it, David. Oh, hello twins! Sorry not to say it before, but I *did* see you... Hello, Mackie! Isn't he a pet, Mary?... David, it was just absolutely marvellous of you to ask me..." and here she paused for breath and David took the opportunity.

"We're all thrilled you could come, Jenny. If your father had said 'No,' we'd have come and carried you off."

"You *wouldn't*, David? Not *really*? Gosh! I wish he had said 'No.'... Do you know I've always wanted to be carried off, but I don't s'pose it will ever happen."

David could not help laughing at her as she looked up at him so seriously. Her hair was not nearly so red and shiny as Penny's, and her eyes were darker, but he knew from their first adventure together that she was brave and true and loyal, and tremendous fun.

"Tom says Peter is riding Sally," Jenny went on. "That's just like her, isn't it? I'm longing to see her... And Tom says we're going to Craven Arms to meet those other friends of yours, too. That's fun! D'you think they'll like me, David?"

"It'll be their loss if they don't!" Tom said shortly. "I've not seen them before either, Jenny... Maybe we won't like them, and that will be just too bad for them."

David looked rather startled. Jenny would never be short of a champion when Tom was about!

"We've got a lot of adventures to tell you, Jenny," Dickie was saying, "but I expect we'll have plenty of time at that Clun place... I'm hungry now, and somebody ought to do something about it... And I tell you another thing! It's getting cold."

He was right about the change in the weather, for the wind seemed to be strengthening and to be coming from the north-east. The sun had disappeared, too, and suddenly the day did not seem as nice.

Mary shivered and picked up Macbeth.

"I'm cold. Let's make a fire right here by this signpost and get warm before we pursue our weary way... I've got an idea something is going to happen to us here."

"Maybe Mary's right," Tom said. "Do you see what I see, Jenny? Do you, David? Coming up the road towards us. Look! Is there another caravan like

that round these parts, and is there another gipsy rides in the driving-seat like Reuben?"

"You're right, Tom! I'm sure you are!" David shouted.

Up the road towards them came a gaily-painted caravan. Red and yellow were the sides, and yellow and red the wheels. The roof was green and so were the shafts, and there were white lace curtains in the windows. David and the twins ran out into the road and Mackie followed, barking excitedly.

"Reuben!" David yelled. "Don't you know us? How are you all? Is Miranda there, and Fenella?"

"It's us, Mr Reuben," Mary shouted. "From Witchend. Do remember us, please, 'cos we've never forgotten you!"

The gipsy smiled with a flash of white teeth and pushed the old hat to the back of his head.

"Remember? How could we forget? Miranda! Fenella!"

And round from the back of the van came an olive-skinned woman with a bright handkerchief round her hair. Then, very shyly, came the gipsy child called Fenella.

Miranda gave them a brilliant smile.

"Only this morning I said to Reuben here that we should meet old friends to-day."

Reuben jumped down.

"But before you tell us where you are going, tell us where is our friend Petronella, who saved Fenella's life?"

"Peter's all right," David announced. "We're all going to Clun for a holiday, but she wanted to ride her pony on her own. She'll be there when we arrive to-night. Where are you going, Reuben?"

When David had mentioned Clun he noticed that the two gipsies glanced at each other rather meaningfully, but before his question could be answered Dickie broke in:

"We were just going to make a fire and have something to eat. We've only got sandwiches, but you're welcome to some of those if you like."

Reuben smiled down at the boy, and then, over his shoulder, said something to Fenella, who went into the caravan for a bundle of dry sticks.

Soon a fire was burning merrily and a great pot of soup was heated over it and shared when it was hot enough, with the sandwiches. They were all glad of the fire, for the weather was getting steadily colder.

Mary began to explain why they were going to Clun, but Reuben interrupted to ask whether they had been there before.

David shook his head. "No, it's all new to us. I suppose you've been there lots of times? Tell us what it's like."

Reuben shrugged. "The town? Like any other of its size, except perhaps that it is quieter. We go through it sometimes on the way to Wales from these parts."

"You see," Miranda broke in, "you go to Clun and we come away."

"Have you just this moment left? I mean this morning?"

"We start in the night. But not from the town. On the other side of the town is the old forest land with sheep farms and many other old and mysterious things as well... That's the country we know... Now we do not like it as much, and maybe we never go back."

When pressed to explain his reasons for never going back Reuben admitted that sheep stealing was going on and that sooner or later - however innocent they really were - he was sure the gipsies would be accused.

"And so we go before the trouble starts," he finished. "Reuben and Miranda have a good name everywhere, but when sheep disappear from farms we

have known for years we think 'tis best for us to move."

David held his hands to the leaping flames and looked up at the grey sky before he said:

"Do you really think so, Reuben? Of course, it's nothing to do with me, but aren't you afraid that people might think you really have got something to do with it if you go away?... I mean everyone who knows you realizes that you couldn't have anything to do with it..."

Reuben looked across at David and smiled slowly.

"What you say makes sense, but it is not so. Always it is the gipsies who are blamed for everything bad."

"I don't believe it," Tom said stoutly, "and we all hope you'll come back while we're at Clun. Don't we, Jenny?"

Jenny nodded and then turned to Miranda and said breathlessly:

"I s'pose you wouldn't tell my fortune, would you? I've never had it done, and I'd never really *dare*, but now you're here and if you wouldn't mind!..."

Miranda laughed, took Jenny's hand and pulled her down beside her. Then she turned the grubby little palm upwards, while Jenny stared at the gipsy with wide eyes.

"Is it *awful*?" she whispered. "Am I going to have an awful fate?"

Miranda closed her fingers over Jenny's and said, "Lots of good luck will come to you, my pretty dear, although you've not had much of it in the past. I think you've to learn never to be afraid, and I do not think you will find that difficult now. Good luck to you!"

David stood up and stretched.

"What's happening to the weather? Is it going to snow? I think we ought to be getting on, for we're to be at Craven Arms just after three."

"No snow yet," the gipsy said. "'Tis too cold for that. Too cold for you to sit about here, I reckon, so you'd all best be getting on your way."

Then Fenella came down the steps of the caravan with a bunch of white heather and Miranda gave them each a sprig.

But to David she gave two.

"One for you," she smiled, "and the other for Petronella, which you shall give to her for us. Tell her that we never forget her, and tell her never to forget to use the Romany whistle when she needs help."

Then Macbeth was lifted into his basket and with many good-byes the Lone Piners started off again. The wind was very strong and David noticed that the twins were not proceeding with quite the same enthusiasm as they had showed in the morning. They were not talking as much either, but Jenny was making up for their silence.

It was a good half-hour later that they reached the outskirts of Craven Arms and rode into the station yard, twenty minutes before the train from Shrewsbury was due.

As he leaned his bicycle against a fence, Dickie said, "I think I'm crippled for ever... Stand still, Mary, and tell me if you feel what I feel. Although I'm standing still now it seems as if my legs are still going round and round on the pedals... It's all very peculiar."

Mary stood still and shut her eyes for a moment.

"I don't get it the same," she said at last. "I just feel my legs are going to drop off!"

They walked to the platform and the twins smiled sweetly at a young porter who was staring at them in amazement.

"None of that now," David muttered. "Just keep yourselves to yourselves, as Agnes says. I'm going to ask if the Warrenders' bikes have come, and you needn't all come into the parcels office with me either."

"Well the bikes are here - I just hope the Warrenders haven't missed the train," David muttered as he rejoined them. "What shall we do if they have? I don't think those kids ought to cycle any further, anyway."

"I expect there's a bus they could catch," Jenny replied, "and they could go on that, anyway, if the man would take their bikes in the luggage compartment. I'll go with them if you like... David, tell me about Peter's Romany whistle."

"I don't know much about the whistle really, except that Reuben and Miranda and Fenella gave it to her and told her that if ever she was in trouble and blew the whistle, then any Romany in earshot would come to her help."

"Why did they give the whistle to her?" Jenny persisted.

"Don't you know, Jenny? I thought you did. If I tell you, you must promise that you'll never tell Peter that I told you. Promise? Peter did the bravest thing I have ever known. She stopped the caravan you saw to-day when the horse was bolting down a hill towards her. Fenella was alone on the driving-seat. Anyway, she saved Fenella's life and the gipsies will never forget it... Here comes the train..."

The long train slid slowly to a standstill, but before it had stopped, David saw Jon's head, with Penny's red one just behind it, looking anxiously out of an open window.

"Hi!" he yelled. "Here we are!" and rushed up the platform.

Jon, with his slow smile, was first out and then turned to help Penny, who, in her haste and excitement, flung her rucksack out on to the platform and pushed her suitcase out after it. Then she jumped out herself, tripped over the luggage and fell against David.

"Oh, David!" she said as she clutched his arm, "it's just marvellous to be here at last. I'm sick of trains after to-day, but now we're really here nothing else matters. How are you all?"

Tom and Jenny, who were keeping in the background, were pulled forward by David next, and there was hand-shaking and grins all round, and they all felt they were friends almost before they had left the platform.

"Your bikes have arrived," David said, "but those who are going to cycle ought to start now because we should try and get there before dark. Who wants to go by bus?"

There was a long silence, until Mary said meekly, "I think Mackie does, and I don't think he's old enough to go by himself, so I'd better go, too."

"An' if Mary goes by bus I s'pose I've got to go as well. 'Course, I'd much rather go on my bike," Dickie said.

"Of course you would, Dickie," David agreed hastily. "Everyone knows that! Jenny, do you mind going with them if the bus will take your bike and luggage as well?"

Jenny agreed, although it was clear that she would rather have cycled; but those who got to know Jenny soon realized that this was the sort of thing which she was often doing for other people.

The bus was quite full and David was rather glad he was not going in it, as there was every sign that the twins were looking forward to entertaining an enthusiastic audience on the journey. "Just behave yourselves," he begged as they clambered in, "and when you get there anyone will tell you how to find Keep View... We'll be as quick as we can."

The driver, who had agreed to take the bicycles, was a kindly man and David had no doubt that the twins and Jenny would be well looked after.

By this time Jon and Penny had collected their bikes and as the four cycled out into the dusk David and Tom were told about Alan Denton and his sheep-dog, and the newcomers were told about the meeting with the gipsies.

There was not so much fun in the journey now, although the wind was not as strong, and they seemed to be riding right into an angry, flaming sunset. It was a lonely road and Jon remembered how Alan had told them that Clun

itself seemed to be at the end of everything. The river was never far away, and on each side of the valley great hillsides shrouded in trees stretched up towards the darkening sky.

"We must be nearly there," David said after another mile. "I think I can see some lights ahead... I'm tired, aren't you, Tom? Hope Agnes has got in the biggest supper I've ever seen."

"I expect the twins have eaten it," Tom said gloomily. "My legs tingle, and I never knew before that the saddle of this bike could be so hard... Here we are, anyway - this must be Clun... If it isn't I'm not going any further. Let's walk the last bit."

They got off their bicycles rather thankfully, for even Jon and Penny were tired after a long day's travel, and trudged into Clun. There was nothing very unusual about the village street but before they could ask the way to Keep View, Penny stopped and pointed ahead.

Although it was nearly dark now the setting sun, at that very moment, flung out a final, fiery challenge to the dying day, Suddenly the western sky glowed red and orange and silhouetted against this strip of colour the travellers saw, for the first time, the ruins of the Castle of Clun dominated by its mighty keep.

Then, as, almost spellbound, they watched this dramatic welcome, they saw five tiny black cut-out figures move across the scene like marionettes on the stage of a toy theatre.

"I know who they are," Tom said quietly as the figures slowly climbed the edge of the hillside. "Dickie and Mary in front... Then Peter with Sally... and Jenny at the back. I bet Mackie's there, too, but he's too small for us to see. Wonder what they're up to already?"

4. Peter's Ride

Only the faintest lightening of the sky showed in the east as Peter went out to saddle Sally on the morning of the Lone Piner's journey to Clun. Above her the rolling grandeur of the hills blocked out the stars, and the air was clear and cold as it stung her cheeks. Sally came at her whistle and nuzzled at the pocket of her jacket as she saddled her quickly and competently.

Mr Sterling was waiting by the little gate of the cottage with Peter's rucksack.

"Are you warm enough, Petronella?" he asked.

She nodded and smiled at him fondly. "Don't worry, Father."

"Well be off if you're going," he said gruffly as she hugged him. "Your flask and sandwiches are at the top of the rucksack. Ride slowly and take care. Which way are you going? Down to Onnybrook or over the mountain?"

"Over the top," Peter said as she swung into the saddle. "I'll telephone you if I'm in trouble. Goodbye, Daddy, and thank you for letting me go."

Mr Sterling raised his hand as if to wave it and Peter felt the sudden sting of tears in her eyes as she waved her own and called, "Good-bye!"

She turned Sally by the reservoir and along the track that ran up the valley which led to the top of the mountain.

There was no need to guide Sally, for the pony knew every inch of these hills and picked her way delicately up the rough track by the side of the rushing stream. The valley narrowed as they rode on, but within half an hour of leaving home Sally turned up a path that could only have been made by rabbits and left behind the bog that was the source of the stream that fed Hatchholt's reservoir. Then she stopped and tossed her head, as if to say:

"There you are, Peter. I've brought you safely up again. We're at the top now."

"Right, Sally," Peter whispered as she touched the pony's neck. "Let's be on our way." And she urged Sally into a canter now as they reached a broad grassy track. The rising sun brightened the sky over to her left and then Peter forgot everything except the thrill of this gallop in the dawn.

David had told of their route and that they planned to meet Jenny at Crown Farm just in case she wished to join them and finish the journey together, but when she left the Mynd behind she chose to make her own way.

It was when she stopped to rest Sally and was enjoying her sandwiches and flask of scalding coffee in the shelter of a big rick just inside a gate that she heard a heavy lorry coming along the road. She noticed this in particular, firstly because the road was narrow - indeed, little more than a lane - and this was the first motor vehicle she had met so far, and secondly because, although she did not know much about cars or their engines, she was quite sure that this one was making a most peculiar noise. First it seemed to bang very loudly and then to splutter. Then came a series of loud reports, and finally, after a horrible grinding, there was no sound but that of men's voices from the other side of the rick.

What happened next was so unpleasant that Peter was not sure what was the best thing to do. She was certain that the men in the lorry were annoyed and that they were quarrelling in a very nasty way. She heard the scrape of heavy boots on the roadway and the growl of ugly voices as one man snarled at the other as he strained at the starting-handle. She had just decided to walk off quietly along the inside of the hedge and not come back until the men had gone, when one of the voices was raised in surprise, and she knew that she was discovered.

"Just look at that, George!" the voice rasped. "Am I a' seeing right, or is that a pony with a saddle on? Just there by corner of the rick! Maybe we're in luck and can get a tow."

At the idea of some rough stranger laying hands on her beloved pony, Peter's courage came back and she put her fingers in her mouth and

whistled. Sally had never failed to answer this summons, and almost before Peter's hand was back in her pocket the pony trotted round the corner of the rick, followed by a man who looked as nasty as his voice had sounded. He stopped and glared furiously at Peter, who stared back at him with much more bravery than she felt. The man turned his head and out of the corner of his mouth said:

"Just come over 'ere, Alfie, and see 'oo's 'ere."

Alfie was not quite such an unpleasant-looking specimen as his companion but he stared insolently at Peter and said quietly:

"What are you doing here, miss?"

There was something frightening about both these men, and yet Peter had the sense to realize that she must never show that she was afraid of them. So she drew herself up - and she was not really very tall - and faced them courageously as she said:

"I was having my lunch in the shelter of the rick before you came along and tried to catch my pony... You wouldn't be able to catch her, anyway... She only comes to me."

The two men glanced at each other and then the first grimaced in a way that was meant to be a smile and said, "That's orlright missy... Jus' surprised us, that's all. This is a lonely place this is on a cold winter's day, and we were surprised like to find you here. Better be getting on your way, miss, hadn't you? You don't want to take no notice of us. Just forget all about us!"

Peter was rather puzzled at this odd turn in the conversation, but she was sure that the best thing she could do was to get on her way as quickly as she could. So before she answered them she called Sally softly by name. The pony, who had been standing some yards off, trotted forward obediently, and before either of the men could move a step Peter was in the saddle. She felt safer there, for she knew now that they could never catch her. She wondered, too, why she should forget all about them. Suddenly curious to see the van that had broken down on this lonely road, she edged Sally a little towards the open gate. As she did so the man with the cap - and Peter

noticed now that he had a horrible squint in one eye - stepped towards her and snapped:

"Keep off the road, miss. Just ride along inside the field this side of the hedge."

"But why?" Peter asked innocently. "Why should I? You've broken down, haven't you? Would you like me to stop at the first garage or the first policeman and ask them to come and help you?"

Alfie took charge.

"No, miss. We wouldn't like you to do that. We shall manage and be away in ten minutes... Don't you worry about us. Just forget us from now on."

Then a very strange thing happened. The wind, which was blowing from the road towards them in the field, suddenly strengthened and with it brought an unexpected scent, and a strangely muffled but familiar sound. Peter could hardly believe her nose or her ears, but she suddenly decided to see for herself why these men wanted to keep her off the road. She bent, patted the horse's neck and urged her forward as the man with the squint grabbed at the bridle and missed.

As she turned round the rick to make for the open gate she realized with a shock that a huge van was blocking her way out into the road. Like a flash she pulled Sally's head round and the good little pony pivoted and turned like a ballet dancer. Back into the field she cantered, past the two angry men, and past the rick, searching for another gate or a lower part of the hedge. Peter found the gap first and set Sally at it, praying that there would be a grass verge on the other side. The pony sailed through the hedge like a bird and landed safely in soft earth.

"You've never failed me, Sally," Peter whispered as she patted her again. Then she looked back down the road.

The van was certainly large and although she was now some distance away she was as sure as she could be that it was a furniture van. It was painted a dull red, and she thought she could just read the word "Wolverhampton" on

the back. As she strained her eyes the two men came out into the road and stood watching her.

Peter shuddered slightly, turned the pony's head and rode on her way with a puzzled frown on her forehead. It was certainly all very odd.

"Jiminy!" Peter said aloud suddenly. "I've just remembered that smell. Now I know what it was. It was *sheep* - and that noise was sheep baaing. That van was full of sheep, but what beasts those men were to keep the van closed up like that. P'raps that's why they didn't want me to go near, just in case I reported such cruelty to someone."

And so she rode on while the weather worsened, the sun disappeared, and a bitterly cold wind swept across the wide valley to the hillside along which she was now riding. She knew that the other Lone Piners would reach Clun from the direction of Craven Arms, but she had planned her ride so that she would discover the little secret town - as she called Clun in her own mind - from the other side.

Sally never seemed to tire, but Peter was very cold and stiff when she left the hill-tops behind her at last and reached a signpost which said "Clun 3 miles." The lane now was very steep, so she got off to stretch her legs and give the pony a rest. The woods here came right down to the road, and it was very dark under the trees. Almost for the first time to-day Peter wondered what her friends were doing and whether they had yet reached Craven Arms. And this thought made her wonder what Jon and Penny were like - and particularly Penny. The Club had been such fun in the early days, and now two strangers were coming. Would it ever be quite the same again?

The road was level once more and the woods were behind them as Sally stopped obediently and Peter lifted herself into the saddle. Soon she caught the gleam of water and realized that this must be the River Clun itself on its way from the hills of Clun Forest to join the river Teme and then the mighty Severn. For another mile she rode on by the side of the stream, next through a little wood, and then she looked up to see a smooth, steep hill in front of her crowned with the ruins of a castle.

"We're here! We've done it, Sally!" Peter said as she bent forward to pat the pony's neck.

As she got nearer she realized that the town must be on the other side of the hill, for she could see no houses - only this great green mound round which the river slid, acting as a moat. She turned Sally to the left, for the slope of the hill was gentler on that side, and joined the road again.

The sun had nearly gone but the broken stones of the ruins were tinged with the red light of his setting as she rode through an open gate on to the soft turf.

Then, hardly knowing whether to laugh or to cry with surprise, she put her fingers in her mouth and whistled a long, shrill "Pee-wit! *Pee-wit!*" As the echoes died away three human figures and a little black dog a quarter of the way up the hill turned their heads and looked back, but it was Mary who led the race down to her and flung her arms round her as she dismounted.

"Peter!" she shouted. "We've only just got here. Isn't this *marvellous*? Have you ever seen such a wonderful, weird, ghostly place in your life? Just as soon as we could escape from Agnes we came here."

"Hello, Peter," Dickie said as he trotted up. "We're very pleased to see you."

"Oh, Peter," Jenny began when she was still ten yards away, "have you had any *marvellous* adventures? We have! We met the gipsies and I had my fortune told."

Peter laughed. "Where are the others?"

"Coming on their bikes. We wanted to cycle, o' course, but that bully David wouldn't let us... And, Peter, Agnes has got the most terrific tea-supper ready for us. We've been in to see her, and it's going to be grand - but we just had to come out and explore before the others came."

"Look! Look!" Jenny squealed suddenly. "There they are... I can see Tom... They're waving... Now they're shouting... Be quiet, Dickie, for just one second and we'll listen."

"Come down now," came faintly up to them. "Let's explore to-morrow... Come back and show us where the house is."

"Of course we must go back," Jenny said. "It wasn't fair to go exploring on our own first... Come on!"

As they turned to go down the hill again Peter bent down to pat Macbeth. Suddenly she felt ashamed of herself for thinking just now that she did not want the Warrenders. But she felt unaccountably shy, too, and she and Sally were the last of the little procession that hurried down the opposite side of the hill to where she could now see lights in the windows of houses and David, Tom, a taller boy who must be Jon, and a slighter figure who must be Penny.

Then the others were all round her, talking and laughing. She stumbled a little with weariness, and realized that David was next to her and was saying:

"This is Peter, who I always wanted you to meet. She's the brains of this club of ours, as you'll soon find out. She's ridden Sally here a much longer way round than we came on bikes, and *I'm* so tired I can hardly stand..."

This was a long speech for David, and Peter felt her cheeks burn as Jon shook hands with her and said, "It's too dark to see you properly, Peter, but it's grand for us to be here and to meet you all."

And on her other side Penny slid an arm through hers, and for once had little to say beyond, "We think we've known you a long time, Peter. Ever since David and the twins came to Rye in the summer."

"If I don't eat soon I'll collapse," Tom said. "Let's find this house we're going to live in and all be polite to each other there... Come on, Jenny. You know where it is. Come in front with me and let's get going."

They turned into a narrow lane which ran steeply downhill, turned left again, and found themselves in the main street.

"It's not far, thank goodness," Mary said. "Just past that lamp-post. Look! There's Agnes at the door now waitin' for us."

As they hurried under the lamp-post Peter and Penny looked at each other in the light and then laughed as they caught themselves doing it.

"Silly of me," Penny said. "Silly because I guessed what you looked like... Or I suppose it was what David told us about you."

Peter was now so weary that she had no answer to this. But she knew that she was going to like these Warrenders, and especially the girl at her side with the red hair and laughing grey eyes.

5. Mr Cantor

Keep View was a very ordinary and rather ugly house. It was not old, but there are tens of thousands of boarding houses like it all over the country, particularly at the seaside. The stairs were steep and led straight down into the hall, which smelt of furniture polish and linoleum. There was some coloured glass in the front door, and the dining-room on the left, and what Agnes called "the lounge" on the right.

Peter and Penny, who shared a room, were first up next morning. They were chatting away as they went into the dining-room where a cheerful fire was already blazing in the grate and a table set for eight was in the window. Outside the morning looked cold, grey and uninviting.

Jenny was next down.

"Oooh!" she said as she saw the fire and ran to it. "Isn't this fun? I had Mary in with me and she's still asleep. Every time I tried to wake her she just said: 'Go away, you beasts'... Besides, Mackie is on her bed and he growled at me... What shall we do this morning, do you think?... Oh! I know what we must do, don't you, Peter? We'll have to have a secret meeting first, won't we? I do wish the others would come... It's too bad of those boys to waste all this time. I know Dad said I could stay all the time until you all came back, but we do want to make the most of every minute, don't we?... Oh! Hello, Tom, where are the others?"

Tom yawned.

"This is a rum place isn't it? Not like I expected. I thought maybe it would be old and what Mary calls ghosty."

Next Jon and David clattered down the stairs, and as half past eight struck on the hall clock Agnes appeared, opened the hatch in the wall and called, "Porridge for all. Come and help yourselves. Hot porridge on a morning like this is as good as an overcoat my old father used to tell me..."

Then the twins, looking surprisingly bright and clean, slipped round the door and joined the porridge queue.

"You see how it is, twin?" Dickie was heard to murmur. "Another second and they would have taken our porridge... Nothing kept for us o' course."

"Just because we're the smallest, 'cept Mackie, we're kept out of the bathroom," Mary said, and then bowed almost graciously to Jon. "Good morning, big Jon! Was it you I heard snoring in a disgustin' manner in the middle of the night?... Mackie and me were disturbed..."

Jon knew the twins well enough to ignore this and Mary was not surprised when he got on with his porridge.

When the meal was over and they had helped Agnes to clear away, Jon beckoned Peter and David into the lounge.

"Hope I'm not being a nuisance," he said as he polished his glasses, "but I wanted to catch you two and specially Peter."

"Whatever for?" Peter said.

"Well," he said quietly, "I wanted to ask you both if you'd let Penny and me be members of this secret club of yours. Of course, Peter, you may not think you know us well enough yet but we thought it would be a grand way to start this holiday if we could get it over this morning."

"Of course we'd love to have you and Penny. It's why we asked you up here anyway..." smiled Peter. "Do you two mind waiting here for a bit and we'll send you a messenger when we're ready for you?"

Ten minutes later the Lone Piners passed down Clun's main street towards Castle Hill. The twins, side by side, and in step, led the way with Mackie at their heels. Peter walked between the two boys while Jenny danced round the party until David complained that she was making him giddy. They climbed the hill until they were actually in the shadow of the mighty walls of the keep, and then Dickie said:

"This place is HQ, Three. One is our own Lone Pine at home. HQ, Two is the barn at Seven Gates, and right in this old castle is HQ, Three... Who's going to fetch up those two and blindfold 'em and lead them here, David? Don't let's waste time."

Before he could answer, David sensed that someone was trying to attract his attention and turned to see Jenny gazing at him soulfully.

"Let me do Penny, David?" she pleaded. "I'll never ask you for anything again if you'll only let me go and blind-fold her and bring her here."

"All right," David laughed. "You go first, Jenny, and then the twins can bring Jon."

And in this way the Warrenders were made members of the Lone Pine Club. The messenger sent back first to Keep View was Dickie, who strutted, a little breathless, into the hall and called:

"I got a message for you, Jon and Penny!"

When they appeared Dickie took a deep breath and said what he had been told to say as quickly as possible.

"If you want to be proper sworn members of our secret club now is your last chance to say 'Yes' or 'No' or forever hold your peace - do you say 'Yes' or 'No'...?"

Here he paused and eyed Jon sternly just in case the bigger boy had the temerity to smile. But Jon's face as he looked down at Dickie was serious and he nodded slowly as he said:

"The answer is 'Yes' for me, Richard."

Dickie blinked at the "Richard" and turned to Penny, who hurriedly composed her face.

"Yes for me too, please," she said demurely.

"O.K. - I mean, very well," Dickie replied coldly. "Now we know where we are. You're the first victim, Penny, and you've got to be blindfolded and come with me."

"Is it far, Dickie?" Penny pleaded. "I mean I get giddy when I'm blindfolded and I just can't stand it."

"You gotta stand it," Dickie said remorselessly. "That's the idea. And it's about a hundred miles."

"Oh dear!" Penny, wailed. "Look after me won't you, Dickie? Let's go now and get it over. Have I got to walk blindfolded? What will everybody think?"

"Doesn't matter what they think. You gotta do it. Come on!" and he grabbed a scarf from the hallstand and tied the knots at the back of Penny's head himself.

"You just wait here," he said darkly to Jon. "We'll come back for you."

Dickie grabbed his victim's arm and led her firmly down the steps into the street. Penny remembered turning to the right and then crossing the road several times, but after that she was hopelessly lost.

At last Penny felt grass under her shoes and realized that Dickie no longer held her arm. In a panic she stretched out her hands to find him.

"Where are you, Dickie? Don't be silly, come back here," and she raised her hands to the scarf round her eyes.

Immediately a horrid, croaking voice behind her said:

"Do not dare to touch that. If you give way now you will have failed the Club and can never be a member... I shall lead you farther in a minute, but for the last time I ask you whether you are prepared to suffer tortures and anything else just to be a member of this Club?"

Penny nodded feebly. She was trying in vain to recognize this voice, but as she was now really giddy all that she wanted was to get rid of the scarf and

see again!

Then a hot hand grasped her own and began to lead her uphill. As they climbed Penny almost giggled at the thought of Jon having to undergo an experience like this.

"You are smiling," said the croaking voice at her side. "There is nothing to smile about now, for you must satisfy the Captain and the Vice-Captain that you can be a worthy member... Can you shed your own blood for the sake of the Club?"

This sounded rather alarming, but Penny gulped and said she thought she could, and then they stopped and she heard the whisper of other voices round her and suddenly she found herself blinking into Peter's laughing face and saw that she and David were leaning against an old grey wall. When she looked up she saw the wintry sky above the ruins of the great keep of the castle.

"Who brought me up here after Dickie?" she asked. "Who was it with that beastly voice?"

Jenny, in the background, turned triumphantly to David.

"There you are, David! What did I tell you? I knew I could do it... You didn't guess, did you, Penny? I bet I scared you!"

"I'll remember that, Jenny," Penny laughed. "One day I'll get my own back. Now what do I have to do?"

David produced an old tin and from it took a dirty piece of folded paper.

"These are the rules of the Lone Pine Club," he said. "We made them up the day we started the club and they're usually kept buried under the original lone pine tree at Witchend. Just read them, Penny, and then sign your name in your own blood under all the others... Peter's got a needle so that you can prick your arm or your finger."

"Your finger'll be best," Jenny said. "Then you can press it hard and it SPURTS out!"

Penny took the grubby scrap of paper and read the rules as well as she could.

"It's the last of all which is the important one," Peter said quietly. "The one on the other side. That's the only one that matters. It's the oath."

Penny turned the paper and read:

"Every member of the Lone Pine Club signed below swears to keep the rules and to be true to each other whatever happens always."

Then she glanced up and met Peter's blue eyes. The two girls looked at each other for a long minute without speaking. Then - "You're right, Peter," Penny said quietly. "Give me the needle. I'd like to sign this."

By the time she had done this they heard the sound of voices below them and ran across to see Dickie and Mary leading Jon up the hill.

Neither David nor Peter need have worried about Jon's interest, for even if he was acting he did it extremely well. When, like Penny, he had pricked his finger and signed the oath in his own blood, David took the paper back and said:

"If this is HQ Three then I suppose we ought to bury the documents here. What do you all think?"

They all agreed and so David produced his big knife, cut and lifted a slice of turf where they were standing and buried the sardine tin. When the turf was replaced they all looked at each other and smiled.

"This Club is nothing to laugh at, Jon and Penny," Mary said seriously. "And you've got something important to learn too... Acksherly we ought to have a new rule that nobody can really be a member until they know how to do the Peewit's whistle."

As they walked down the hill towards the town Tom gave the new members some lessons in whistling the call and they were still practising when, at the foot of the hill, they walked along the river bank until they came to the little stone bridge which carried the road from Clun into Wales.

The bridge was very narrow and between each of the arches was a triangular recess where foot passengers could stand aside for traffic. As they stopped to watch the water from one of these recesses there was a furious ringing of a bicycle bell. They all looked up as a man rushed down the hill towards them.

Penny, who had only glanced up idly, suddenly stiffened and grabbed Jon's sleeve.

"It's Alan! HI, ALAN! Stop! It's us."

But even as she shouted the cyclist whirled over the bridge, and although he undoubtedly heard Penny call his name he made no attempt to stop but merely called back something over his shoulder.

"Well!" Penny stormed. "Of all the mean, rude things. He knew us, didn't he, Jon? I'm sure he did..."

"Do you know him then?" David asked. "Who is he? I thought he called out something about 'Police'."

"I thought so too," Jon said. "He's the chap we met on the train. He's got a sheep farm near here. Don't you remember we told you about meeting him last night?"

"Whoever he is he was in a hurry," Tom said.

"He said 'Police', did he?" Penny said. "Are you sure that's what he said, David? I think I'll go to the Police Station to see if he's there. Coming, Peter? I'd like to know why he was in such a hurry."

"P'raps someone has been murdered or kidnapped for an awful fate," Jenny added hopefully. "... I'll come with you, Penny. I'd like to see if anything

exciting has happened round here."

So when Alan Denton came out of the cottage in the High Street that had the words "County Police" over the door, he found what looked like a large crowd round his bicycle.

He soon picked out Penny's red head and said, "Oh, hello! How are you? Sorry I couldn't stop on the bridge but I was in a hurry."

"We noticed that," Penny said coldly. "We did think you were rather rude, Alan. I wanted you to meet all my friends."

Alan looked rather alarmed.

"Are these all really your friends? I thought there was a fire or something?... Oh, hello, Jon! I didn't see you before in the crowd. How are you?... Of course I'd like to meet you all but I'm afraid I can't wait long because something rather unpleasant has happened and I've got to get back to Bury Fields. Why don't you all walk some of the way with me? - I've got to walk up the hill anyway."

Jon introduced them all and David kicked Dickie's ankle none too gently as he edged forward with Mary close behind him. David knew very well that if not checked the twins would be only too willing to put on their famous "introduction act."

"I hope there's nothing seriously wrong, Alan..." Jon said, "Just say so if there is and we'll clear off. We didn't mean to butt in, you know... Or if there's anything we can do to help...?"

They had reached the bridge again now and were straggling across it when Alan Denton said, "I suppose there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you, but please don't talk about it to anyone else. Promise me that, all of you? Good! The truth is that sheep stealing has begun in the farms round here and last night I lost fifty or sixty of my best ewes and you can guess I'm feeling pretty sore... Now I must get on. Wish I'd got some time to show you round the woods and hills, but I will some day when we've found our sheep... I reckon the gipsies have done this."

"We know some gipsies," David said indignantly, "and they're good friends of ours. Don't be so hasty putting the blame on Romany people."

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"That may be, but I don't trust any gipsies and I hope if you see any about you'll let Sandridge, the policeman here, know... Now I must get along. Cheerio all!... Here! Just a minute... Why don't you all come over to Bury Fields to-morrow to see my mother? I'll have more time to show you round then. Will you come? Come early for tea, then you can get back before dark."

Peter stepped forward.

"Just before you go, Mr Denton, I think I ought to tell you something that happened to me yesterday." Alan got off his bicycle again and listened politely while Peter told him of her adventure, "... and I'm quite sure that the van was full of sheep," she finished.

Alan looked puzzled.

"Seems odd to me," he said at last. "But it just isn't possible to get somebody else's sheep into a furniture van in daylight, and it would be too noisy at night I should have thought... Still, thanks for mentioning it... See you all to-morrow... 'Bye."

Peter flushed with humiliation.

"He didn't believe me. I'm sure he didn't. He was nice about it, but I think he thought I was making it up."

"P'raps it's all a dream," Mary said. "Anyway I want my dinner."

It was very cold and dull after dinner, and Penny suggested that after they had helped Agnes to wash up they sit round the fire and gossip.

"After all," she said as she reached up for a wiping-up cloth, "we don't *have* to be out all the time do we? I like indoors in the winter and think it's a bit silly to keep on dashing about in the cold and wet... And you just do your share, Jon, and David too... You're neither of you too important to help wash up."

"All of you can stay here and help for I have something to tell you," Agnes announced suddenly.

They crowded round as she put her hands on her hips and began.

" 'Tis very strange that just as soon as my poor sister is taken away that the house fills up, but so it is and this very afternoon there's a new gentleman coming here to stay for a while."

"But he can't do that," Dickie said. "We don't want him, do we, twin?"

"I shouldn't think so," Mary said. "But we could look at him first."

"And that's just what I mean," Agnes said as she faced the Lone Pine Club grouped round her. "There's to be no nonsense. He spoke to me on that dratted telephone this very morning while you were out... Very nice and gentlemanly he sounded, but quiet and peace he must have because he's been sick and in hospital."

"Did you tell him about us, Agnes?" David asked.

"I did that, and he said he supposed he must just put up with that but he must have quiet, so maybe he'll order a fire in his bedroom and stay up there. He told me he's out walking a lot and collecting bits o' stone and the like from the hills around... But you must all promise Agnes that you'll behave yourselves with him so that he doesn't complain..."

"Don't worry, Agnes," said David. "We'll stand by you and wait on him if it will help. When's he coming?"

"I reckon he'll be here for tea," Agnes said, "and thank you for helping. Be off with you now."

They went back to the lounge and looked out of the window. The afternoon was cold and grey and the street deserted.

Penny ran back to the fire.

"Come on over here," she called. "Pile on some logs, Jon. Draw the curtains. Shut out this beastly day and let's have fun here... I don't want to go out again to-day and we don't have to, do we?"

Nobody argued with her. They pulled up some chairs, flung the cushions on the floor and were happily scorched by the leaping flames.

But the time went so quickly and they were talking so hard that they did not hear Agnes when she opened the door, switched on the light, and said, "And this is Mr Cantor, who would be liking a look at the fire I've no doubt while I'm getting the tea for you all."

The Lone Piners blinked in the sudden glare and looked up at the stranger..

They saw a short, stout little man with a rosy, innocent face, wearing glasses with heavy horn sides. His head was white and shining but he had brushed several long wisps of hair across his bare brow in an attempt to disguise his baldness.

As Agnes closed the door behind her he looked rather as if he had been thrust into a cage of wild animals without chance of escape. David remembered his manners and Peter, who was sitting on the hearthrug leaning against his legs, suddenly found herself pushed forward as he jumped to his feet.

"Good afternoon, sir. Won't you come close to the fire? There's plenty of room."

Jon hauled himself off the sofa.

"Do you think you could stand the strain of being introduced to us all, sir? There's rather a lot of us to remember, but Agnes says you are going to be

here for a few days and so are we, so perhaps we'd better try and get it over."

Mr Cantor started and stepped forward under the light.

"Bless my soul!" he said, in a strangely childlike voice. "Good gracious! What a variety of youngsters to be sure. Charming scene! Charming... Thank you very much, my boy. May I be presented to the young ladies first?"

Peter did not care much for this sort of thing and acknowledged the introduction rather coldly. Penny was charming - so charming that she patted the vacant position on the sofa and invited Mr Cantor to sit by her. Jenny just did not like him and made no effort to hide her feelings. Tom seemed to share the same opinion, and the twins were pretty confident of the effect they would have on the newcomer when their turn came. But on this occasion they were disappointed, because Mr Cantor looked at them both very carefully the first time and then, after being merely polite, seemed to lose all interest in them.

David noticed this and made a mental note to remind the twins not to try and get their own back. He had seen the results of non-co-operation with Dickie and Mary too often not to be nervous now.

After he had recovered his composure a little Mr Cantor began to enjoy himself, and when Agnes wheeled the tea-trolley into the room ten minutes later she was relieved to see how well he had settled down, and so stopped worrying about the new guest.

But Peter could not make him out. Several times during tea she thought she caught him looking at one or other of them rather keenly when he thought that he was not being watched, and she had the strange feeling, too, that he was pretending to be someone else. Peter knew that sometimes she had odd feelings about people and things. But she shrugged away her suspicion and asked, "I wish you would tell us something about Clun, Mr Cantor."

Mr Cantor turned to his questioner.

"Petronella, is it not? Ah, yes! Peter, to be sure! If you would all like to hear I can tell you something of this country. Do you realize that here on the hills around this little town the oldest men in Britain lived and fought? Did you know that only a few miles away one of the mighty roads the Romans made still runs, straight as a rule, as it did when their legions marched this way?... And have any of you heard of Offa's Dyke?..."

First he told them that it was his job to be interested in history, old buildings and historical remains, and that he had come to Clun to explore some of the prehistoric burial places which had recently been discovered in the hills.

"Tell us about that dyke," Dickie said. "We know something about dykes. Is it full of water?"

"Not this one, Richard. This is a very special dyke built twelve hundred years ago by wise King Offa. It is a wall of earth with a deep ditch on the western - that is the Welsh - side, running for one hundred and fifty miles north from Chepstow between the Severn and the Dee."

"Can you walk along it or in it now? And who was King Offa?" Mary asked.

"You can walk along it some of the way to-day. Not far from here there is a long stretch for you to explore. Offa was a king of the Mercians, and Mercia was the kingdom which you would call the Midlands. He had the dyke built to mark the boundary between his kingdom and the marauding Welsh."

Mary, who was sitting on the hearthrug with Mackie's head in her lap, suddenly knelt upright.

"Do you mean to tell us that we can *acksherly* walk along that dyke the king made?"

"Of course you can. There's a stretch of it but a mile or two away."

"Did you hear him, Dickie? We'll go and do that tomorrow... And are there any castles near?"

"All the border country is castle country, Mary," Mr Cantor said as he got up. "Now I must go and unpack, and thank you all for looking after me so well..."

Tom was the first to speak when they were alone.

"What a rum old chap... Fancy us coming all this way just to have a holiday with him."

"I think you're very unfair," Penny replied. "I think he's nice, and he's interesting."

"Well Mary and me don't care so much 'bout what happened a billion years ago," said Dickie. "We want something to happen *now*!"

"That's true, twin," Mary said dreamily, looking into the fire. "We came yesterday and we haven't had a real adventure yet - unless you call Mr Cantor an adventure... Oh, Dickie! I s'pose you noticed he was very rude to us when he first came in?"

Dickie nodded brightly. "I'm remembering *that*, twin!"

6. Bury Fields

Next morning Mr Cantor had his breakfast with the Lone Piners in the dining-room. He beamed at them all when he came in and was still very bright and clean and shining. He was dressed in a rather remarkable greenish tweed suit, the jacket of which looked quite nice, but when Dickie and Tom noticed his very thin legs sticking out from a pair of baggy breeches and caught each other's eye, they both had to stifle their laughter. Dickie then choked over his porridge, Jenny began to giggle at the sight of his struggles, and Penny said far too loudly, "I do think you might share the joke."

The situation was saved by the innocent subject of the disturbance.

"And what are you all going to do today? The weather looks and feels extremely seasonable, and as I have a slight cold I believe I may stay in for the present... But surely some of you will be out exploring?"

"I expect we shall, sir," David answered. "We don't know what we shall do this morning, but directly after dinner we're going off to a farm called Bury Fields."

"Indeed? And may I ask why you are going and whether you know where it is?"

David opened his mouth to answer, but changed his mind as Peter kicked his ankle sharply under the table.

"Just some friends of ours, Mr Cantor," she said. "And we shall know how to find it, thank you."

Mr Cantor put down his knife, looked at her over the top of his glasses, but said nothing else. After he had finished his breakfast and left the room Penny said, "I think you were rude to him, Peter."

"Maybe," Peter replied tersely, "but I didn't like the way he said 'And may I ask why?' I expect he's a nice man really, but what we do is nothing to do

with him."

The sun was bright but the weather bitterly cold when, after an early dinner, the Lone Piners set off together over the bridge and up a winding lane that climbed steeply for a mile. When at the top they paused for breath and turned round they could see Clun and its castle on the hill like a toy town below them.

David consulted his map, and after another hundred yards they came to the field gate he was seeking. Bury Fields was not easy to find because the track that led to it was not sign-posted and seemed to wander without a purpose first through fields and then over the actual moorland on which they noticed some sheep. The farm buildings were all of grey stone and the roofs were green with age and the action of the weather. The house looked as if it had grown out of the soil and was a real part of this particular country. But it looked a friendly little house, and as they walked down towards it a short figure came out of the front door and waved to them.

"You'll be the young friends Alan told me about?" she said when they were near enough to hear. "Come along in and welcome. It's a cold day to be walking."

Mrs Denton led them round the side of the house to a door which led directly into one of the most fascinating rooms they had ever seen. "My son told me about you... Now you're all to make yourselves at home and be comfortable. Alan will be along in a minute or two and we'll have tea... You can see it's ready and waiting for you on the table and the kettle is on the boil."

Nobody could help feeling at home with Mrs Denton. She was small and plump and rosy, and younger than Agnes. Her speech was soft and slow and her smile rare, for her face was often sad.

The kitchen in which they found themselves was enormous. The floor was of stone, but covered with rugs and mats. The fireplace must have been ten feet wide and four feet deep, with seats each side of it. Against one wall

was a long, narrow table with a bench each side, and on the table was the most magnificent tea that Dickie had ever seen.

Then they heard Alan's step outside, and Mrs Denton's face lighted up as he came into the room with Lady, the sheep-dog, at his heels. He bent to kiss his mother and then turned to the Lone Piners.

"Glad you found us," he smiled. "If Mother's ready let's sit down and eat, and then I'll tell you my news."

"What sort of news, son?" Mrs Denton called from the stove as she poured the water into the teapot.

"Is it news of the missing sheep?" David said. "That's what we've been wanting to ask ever since we got here."

Alan took a bite of scone and jam before answering.

"None, I'm afraid. Seems as if they got clean away." He turned to Mrs Denton and went on: "I've told these kids a bit about our trouble. No need to worry about them knowing, I'm sure, so I might as well tell the rest... The more people that know about what's going on in this part of the Forest the better, I reckon..."

He sounded so serious that they all stopped eating and stared at him. Mrs Denton fidgeted with her teaspoon and said quickly: "What is it, Alan?"

"I've been around this afternoon," Alan went on slowly. "I've been over to see Clancy at Three Oaks and Dixon at Little Hollow, and both of them are losing poultry now as well as sheep. We're planning to take it in turns to keep guard at nights... Trouble is, o' course, there's not enough of us to cover all the country round, though I reckon we could all guard our own places somehow."

Tom and David spoke at once.

"Why don't you ask us? I'll come."

"Will you let us in? We'll help to keep guard."

"I'll lend you Mackie if you'll let me come, too," Mary said.

Alan looked down the table and smiled at his mother.

"I told you they were the right sort, didn't I?" Then, to the Lone Piners, "It's grand of you to offer to help, and there's a chance in a day or two that we might be grateful for some sentries or guards, but there's nothing you can do now except to keep a good look-out for anyone suspicious either in Clun or on the hills around here. It's at night the sheep stealing is done, obviously, and that's what makes it difficult for us to be in the right place at the right time." Alan went on, "But we'll get 'em in the end."

"What could we do to help?" Penny asked plaintively. "Here's Peter and Jenny and me just as much use as any of the boys."

"I'd like to be disguised," Jenny began, but "What about that furniture van I saw?" Peter interrupted. "It was full of sheep I know, but when I told you yesterday you didn't seem very interested."

"I'm sorry, Peter," Alan said. "Maybe you're right after all, but nobody could bring a van up to a flock of sheep in daylight without somebody hearing it or seeing it."

Jon spoke for the first time in this conversation,

"Are you sure of that? It looks as if that's just what they have done. More likely daylight than night I should think, because surely they couldn't see how to drive them into a van after dark. Besides, wouldn't sheep make a lot of noise at night if they were suddenly confronted with a furniture van?"

Alan nodded.

"Maybe that's so, Jon, but whoever is on this job is a very clever enemy... Anyway that's enough of that now... I'll promise I'll ask you to help if the others agree and if we need you very badly... Meanwhile, just keep your ears and eyes open."

They were all quieter than usual for the rest of tea, because the older ones, at any rate, could see how upset Mrs Denton was and how serious was this matter of stealing the farmers' livelihood. As soon as the meal was over the girls helped Mrs Denton clear the table and wash up. Alan took the boys round the farm, but after fifteen minutes or so said, "I don't much like the look of the weather. The wind has gone and it smells foggy to me. I think you'd better be on your way but I hope you'll come again whenever you can."

They went back to the house and told the girls to hurry, but it was another fifteen minutes before they all waved "Good-bye" to the Dentons and walked up the track. They had been longer at Bury Fields than they realized and it was already dusk as they looked back at the golden glow of the farmhouse windows below them.

"I like them all very much," Mary said, "but I don't like where they live... It's too lonely."

Tom heard her and turned round.

"You're lonely at Witchend, aren't you, Mary, and this house is no lonelier than Hatchholt, is it?"

"We're miles from anywhere up there of course," Peter replied, "but I know what Mary means. This country is different somehow, and you can't help feeling lonely in it. I wouldn't like to live here. Do you know what I mean, Penny?"

"Yes, I do. It makes me feel creepy... I say, Peter! I suppose those boys know where they're going, because I don't believe we came this way."

"Neither do I. Hi! David! Wait for us."

The boys and Jenny and Mary, who were about fifty yards ahead, heard her call and waited for them to come up.

"I suppose you know where we are..." Penny began breathlessly, and then stopped. There was a long pause while they all looked at each other and

Mary picked up Mackie and said, "The little darling's coat is all wet... David! It's getting foggy and it's cold too,"

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid I've been an awful fool," David said slowly. "I'm not sure that I know where we are and I've been idiot enough to leave the map at the Dentons'."

There was another long silence until Peter said, "Don't look so miserable, David. It's not really your fault and any of us might have lost the map. You always take on the job of guide, anyway. There's nothing to worry about really. We're all together."

"Oh, isn't there something to worry about?" Dickie snorted. ' "That's all you know, Peter. First of all it will soon be supper time, and next you've never been lost in a fog and Mary and me have. And let me tell you it's jolly beastly."

The light had nearly gone now and although the fog was not thick it looked as if it might soon be very unpleasant. For a minute or two they wondered whether it would be worth while trying to find their way back to Bury Fields, but Jon and Tom were against that.

"We can't be far away from a road," the latter argued, "and this track must lead somewhere. If we go back it will mean Alan will have to turn out and guide us and he's got enough worries."

"Let's go on and chance it," Jon said. "This must lead somewhere. Tracks lead to roads and I think nearly all the roads round here must lead to Clun in the end. Don't you worry, twins. We'll be all right."

"We're not worried, thank you, Jon - we've had an adventure like this before."

So they went on in the gathering gloom for another ten minutes without passing anything they could remember.

Suddenly Tom, who was in front with a very subdued Jenny, turned round and shouted, "The track goes downhill now and I can see some trees in

front. I think maybe we're getting somewhere."

But all that they found was a small cluster of pine trees in a hollow. Their track led them into it and then joined another rough road.

"Now we must be nearer something," Jon said, "for this road has been used lately and looks quite important for this sort of country. Trouble is, which way shall we go - to the right downhill, or up to the left?"

"If only I hadn't been such a fool about the map," David muttered.

"When you've quite finished," Mary broke in, "somebody had better come over here and see if they can see what I see."

Dickie was at her side before she had finished speaking.

"No need for anyone to worry any more," he said. "We're saved. Mary's saved us. This adventure is over."

But Dickie was wrong. The adventure had hardly begun.

They all crowded round Mary and looked where she was pointing. While they had been standing at the junction of the two tracks she had turned to the right and taken a few steps down the hill. Now, in the deepening twilight they could just see below them an ugly, squat house which appeared to be surrounded by high stone walls.

"I don't believe it," Penny said. "It can't just be there. I mean why didn't we see it as we came along that other path? We ought to have done. This is a mirage."

"I'm not sure what a mirage is," Tom said, "but it looks like a prison. P'raps we've walked to Dartmoor and didn't know it. My feet feel as if we had."

Mary tucked Mackie under one arm and then felt for Peter's hand. "I hate it," she said and shuddered.

"Looks to me as if there's a pair of big wooden gates in the wall at the bottom of the hill here," said Jon. "Tom's right. It does look like a prison,

and it looks empty too."

"Let's go and ask where we are and for a drink of water," was Dickie's bright suggestion

"I can't think of anything I'd hate more than a drink of water," Tom replied. "But we'd better go and see if anyone lives there and can help us."

After some argument Jon, David and Tom went down to explore.

"And don't any of you move from here," were David's parting words. "Look after them, Peter."

As soon as they were clear of the trees they noticed something else very odd about this strange house.

"Look to the right of those big doors," Tom said. "It seems as if there's a big bank stretching along in front of the walls."

"You're right, Tom," David replied. "It might almost be the wall of a moat."

"I bet it is," Jon said promptly. "I bet that's Offa's Dyke that old Cantor told us about... Look! It runs in a straight line as far as you can see on that side of the house and I dare say that it goes up the hill the other side if we could only see properly... This is an odd sort of place. Those walls must be at least eight feet high and it looks to me as if they've got broken glass on the top... Wonder if they want to stop people from getting in or prevent them from getting out... And I still can't understand why we didn't see it before we got to that little wood."

"Here we are, anyway," David said. "And what do we do now? I shouldn't think anyone has lived here for years."

"I believe they have," Jon said looking at the ground. "This track has been used recently, anyway... Surely there's a bell somewhere?"

They found a rusty iron bell-pull on the brick pillar at the right-hand side of the wooden gates. Tom reached up and pulled it heartily, but although they listened intently for an answering peal no sound broke the silence.

"I'm sure that bell has been used," Tom said. "It pulls easily enough and it didn't squeak. You try it, David."

So David tried, but with no more success, and while they stood there uneasily in the dark wondering what was the best thing to do there came the sound of the peewit's whistle.

"That's Peter or Dickie," David said at once. "They're the best whistlers - I wonder what's wrong?"

"Maybe they're warning us," Tom said. "P'raps someone is coming. What shall we do? I'll call them back."

Tom was the best whistler of them all and his answering signal was so real that David almost looked up, expecting to see the shy little bird. Then he felt Jon's hand gripping his arm and heard him say under his breath:

"Turn round carelessly in a sec. I think there's someone watching us through a little window in the doors... Don't let them see that you've noticed."

David felt his mouth go dry with excitement as he said normally, "Call them again, Tom." Then, as the peewit's lament wailed through the gloom he turned casually with his hands in his pockets and looked as closely as he could at the surface of the great doors. He kicked a pebble idly and moved a step or two nearer, pretending - and not finding this very difficult - to be fidgeting about because they did not know what to do. Then he thought he noticed a slight movement on the surface of the nearest door. Jon was right, then; they were being watched.

David felt that he could now make some amends for leaving the map behind. By a stroke of good fortune his electric torch was in his jacket pocket, although he had forgotten it until now. He had it out in a flash and calling suddenly, "Watch the doors," he pressed the button and swung the beam up until it picked out a little door about three inches square in the centre of the big, right hand gateway. As Jon and Tom wheeled round at David's warning the trap closed with a click, but not before David had seen a human eye watching them. It had disappeared before he could have counted three, but not before it had given him a shock.

Not only was there something unpleasantly different about the eye, but the idea of someone watching them while refusing to answer the bell was maddening. David felt himself go hot with anger and was surprised to hear his own voice shouting, "Whoever you are please open the doors. We're lost and we need help."

And Tom, who had also glimpsed the sinister eye, rushed forward and banged on the doors with his fists.

"Let us in!" he yelled. "Open the door. Answer us."

They waited for another minute and then called again, but there was no sound which even suggested life within these strange, grey walls. Then Jon said quietly, "That's very odd. I think we'd better go back to the others as we're not going to get any help here. Come on."

Half-way up the rough track which led to the wood they heard running footsteps coming towards them.

"Whistle, Tom!" David said urgently. "Quick!" Again the call wailed and this time was answered - but not with a whistle.

"It's me! Penny!" a familiar voice called, and then she was with them and clinging to Jon's arm.

"What's wrong, Penny?" David said.

"We think we're being watched up there in the wood. The twins are sure of it and say someone is spying on us. It may sound silly to you but I felt it too, and I think Peter's quite sure... Did you have any luck?"

"No, we didn't," Jon said shortly. "The gates are locked and barred although we think the place is inhabited as we thought we saw someone spying on us."

Tom started to speak and then stopped.

"But we heard you shouting as if you'd all gone mad," Penny said.

"We thought we'd try making a noise but it was no good. We'll just have to keep walking and hope for the best."

The light had gone now but the fog was no worse and a yellow moon was poking her rim over the little spinney where the others were waiting. As the boys and Penny reached them, Dickie said, "What are we going to do? Go on or stay?"

"We're going right back to Clun now," David answered. "The moon is coming up and I've got an idea that the right way is to follow this new track up the hill."

"I'm sure it's been used recently," Jon said again. "Sure of it. If we follow it up through the trees I'll bet it takes us eventually to a road... Come on - let's go!"

They set off, close together, up the rough track between the sighing trees. Dickie edged up to David and whispered, "Did Penny tell you that we're being tracked and watched?"

"She did, Dickie. Are you sure? Have you seen anybody?"

"Not exactly, but we know we're right. We heard somebody at the edge of the wood."

"It's no use looking like that, David," Mary broke in. "We know you don't believe us when you look like that. This time you're wrong again. Ask Peter."

"Yes, I do think there's someone skulking about round us." Peter said. "While you were down at the house I know I heard a twig snap and thought I saw a shadow moving through the trees... Let's try and prove it... Looks as if there's a little hill ahead. As soon as we're all over the top two of us had better flop down in the heather and watch the path to see if someone comes out of the wood and follows."

"Right, Peter. You and I will do that... You others go on slowly once you're over the top and just keep on talking."

Although it was very difficult to be certain, they both agreed that some sort of dark human figure came out of the trees, looked towards them for a long minute, and then started to follow them.

"Quick, David," Peter whispered. "Back to the others and warn them. We'll catch this chap somehow."

As soon as they caught them up David gave his orders.

"There is somebody. The twins were right... Divide up and some go one side of the track and some the other. Don't get too near because we don't want him to see us. Let him walk between us and we'll trail him and see where he's going. Quick now and quiet. Nobody to make a move after he's passed until I do."

They scattered obediently and lay full-length in the heather watching the top of the little hill over which the stranger must come. Jenny almost screamed when a dim figure did appear against the skyline, But now they had a surprise, for instead of running towards them the figure stopped, looked round intently, and then disappeared again. The Lone Piners lay still waiting for David's signal. They saw him stand up and were just ready to follow him when he signalled them down again and flung himself flat on his face. Then they heard an odd rattle or jangle and suddenly a figure on a bicycle appeared at the top of the hill and came bumping down the track between them.

It was too dark and they were all too far away for any of them to recognize the cyclist, and they could not even be sure that it was the same man who had come out of the wood. As soon as possible they scrambled through the heather to the track, but by then there was no sign of the mysterious cyclist.

Nobody said much. If the cyclist was the man who had been watching them from the spinney and again from the top of the rise he had certainly made them all look rather foolish.

"P'raps he's got an invisible bike," Dickie said. "I mean invisible some of the time... I'm cold and I want my supper, but you all see now that Mary and me were right, don't you?"

The path led downhill and after ten more minutes they found themselves between hedges and David's torch proved that the track was now a rough lane.

"We'll be all right now," Tom said thankfully.

He was right for, soon after, they came to a road and a signpost, the righthand finger of which said "Clun".

When, tired, cold and hungry, they clattered at last up the steps of Keep View it was to find a very angry Agnes waiting for them. She was very cross indeed and threatened to send the twins to bed at once.

"Just let me have my supper, Agnes," Dickie pleaded, "and then be mad with us all after. You know how sorry we are, but it's like Jenny says and Fate was against us."

When at last they were sitting down to supper Peter asked where Mr Cantor was, and Agnes explained that he had his meal upstairs in his room some time ago. As soon as she had closed the door behind her Dickie clapped his hand to his head and cried out as if in pain. Neither David nor Mary looked up from their soup, but the latter said:

"Don't worry, anyone. He's got an idea and I bet it's a big one. What is it, Dickie?"

Dickie looked round the table triumphantly.

"I bet you'd all like to know who was riding that bike up there on the moor, wouldn't you? I bet I know who it was. Here, Mary. Just come exploring with me and we'll prove it and be back in a sec."

The others got on with their meal without much comment when the twins had gone, but David did say: "Dickie must be on to something if he's left his supper."

Suddenly the door burst open to disclose the twins.

"What did we tell you...?" Mary began, but Dickie stopped her with a dramatic gesture and closed the door behind them.

"What did we tell you?" Mary went on. "We've done it again for the Lone Piners - you can't do without us. Now listen! That bike with the rattling bell that the spy escaped on is Mr Cantor's."

There was a long pause and then knives and forks clattered on to plates as the others stared at them in amazement.

Then, "Don't be ridiculous!" Penny said. "You two are trying to be funny again. How can you possibly know that? He's not the sort of man to have a bicycle."

"Go on, Dickie," Peter said quietly. "Tell us how you know,"

Dickie spoke soberly now.

"I'll tell you. This morning after we'd been for a walk with Mackie we explored round the back here. There's a sort of garden and a shed with all sorts of things in it. There was a man's bike in there and it had a label on the handlebars, addressed to Mr Cantor here. We had a look at the bike and I noticed that the bell was loose and rattled... The bike is there now though in a different place, but the bell still rattles and we bet that man on that bike was Mr Cantor spying on us - or up to some dirty trick."

7. That Van Again

As soon as supper was cleared away they gathered round the fire and began to discuss the day's adventures. Nothing that the elder ones could say could make Dickie change his mind about Mr Cantor,

"It's no use you trying to bully us, David and Jon," Mary said in defence of her twin, "and we don't care what you say but you're wrong and we're right. We 'zamed that bike in the shed this morning, and if you want to know we did just take it out on the garden path and sort of try it, and the bell jangled."

"And there's no need for you to say anything about us just trying the stupid old bike," Dickie added, "'cos that's nobody's business but ours. We didn't hurt the thing but we did put it away quickly because the bell was loose and jangled."

"Yes, Dickie, we understand about the jangling bell and you needn't mention it again, but how do you know it was Mr Cantor riding it this evening?" David said.

"Well, you see," Dickie began a little doubtfully, "we know it was his bike, and after all nobody would want to borrow his bicycle and go riding it in the fog and the dark all over those beastly hills where we got lost, would they? I mean it just doesn't make sense."

"Of course it doesn't make sense," Peter broke in. "I think you're right, Dickie. I've always been suspicious of Mr Cantor and now I'm sure I'm right. He looks too smug - to me, and anyway it's a silly time of year to go looking around the country for old bones and things."

Then the door opened and Agnes came in.

"And what was it made me wonder whether those two little ones had gone to bed? You're both tired out and it's getting late. Be off with you! Goodness

gracious me, but you're both yawning while I look at you. Come along and no arguments."

The twins looked at her, then at each other, and decided that Agnes was right and that this was no time for further discussion. At the door Dickie turned and hissed, "Why don't you go and look for yourselves? *You know where I mean.*"

"And another thing," Mary said, "don't any of you dare to plan anything without us. It's only because we're not as big as you that we're driven off to bed in this brutal way. And you're all yawning! Why don't you make them go to bed, Agnes? You just don't know how I wish I was older so that I didn't have to do things like this."

When the door had closed behind them David said, "I've got a brainwave. What Mary said is true about us being tired. I suggest that Jon and Tom and I go out and examine that bicycle and then we all go to bed-

"I must say that's a futile sort of idea," Penny broke in.

"If you hadn't interrupted me," David said coldly, "I was going on to suggest that we all meet in Jon's and my room about midnight for a Council of War. What do you others think? Is it a good idea?"

"It's a good idea," they all chorused.

"You girls go up now then," David said. "We're going to examine the bike and we'll see you all later. And be quiet at midnight, else we shall wake Agnes and Mr Cantor. I'm sorry about the twins, but they can't expect to be in everything..."

"Can't they?" Peter laughed. "Cheerio for the present."

Jon had put his alarm clock under his pillow so that its shrilling should wake nobody but himself. It rang soon after twelve and although he was sleeping deeply he woke at once. This idea of a meeting seemed for a few

minutes to be particularly stupid, for bed seemed the best of all places; but at last he reached over and shook David, who stirred and then sat up, instantly awake for once.

"Close the windows," he said, "and pull the curtains right across. I'll switch on the fire and go and wake the others."

He tried Tom first and the door squeaked horribly so that Dickie sighed, stirred in his sleep and then turned over with a grunt. David crept over to Tom's bed, shook him and then whispered in his ear till he awoke and remembered.

"I think we're all crackers," he muttered as he swung his legs out of bed. "All right, David. I'll go along to your room, but I hope we're not too long."

Peter answered the second soft knock and within five minutes they were all, except the twins, by the fire in David's room.

"I must tell you girls first," David began, "that we went down with a torch and had a look at the bike and that we think Dickie is right about Mr Cantor. It sounds amazing, I know, but there's no doubt that the bike had been used this evening. The tyres had got fresh mud on them, and there was a scrap of heather jammed between the handlebars and the jangling bell. There doesn't seem much doubt to us that Mr Cantor is a very suspicious character and that we should watch him closely now that this sheep-stealing has started. We've got to make plans now for tomorrow, and for the next day, and decide whether we tell Alan Denton all we suspect or whether we should hang around and try and watch Cantor. What do you think?"

Penny spoke first. "You may be quite right about the bike, David, but I don't think he's a thief. I think we ought to take it in turns to watch him anyway if everybody else thinks he's acting suspiciously."

"Well, I don't like him," Peter said in her straightforward and honest way, "and I never have, and I still can't see why he should want to come and stay at Clun at this time of the year. I'll believe him when he proves himself but I feel certain that he's up to something very mysterious and I shall watch him

as much as I possibly can. Perhaps he'll be the beginning of another big adventure for us?... What do you think, Jon?"

Jon shrugged. "I'm beginning to think with you, Peter. He's a very odd bloke."

After some more talk David got up.

"I don't know about you lot but I'm tired. I wish you'd all go away and by breakfast time I hope I'll have thought of a way for us to watch him without him knowing... or perhaps somebody else could get an idea? Good night, all."

When Peter got back to her own room she felt strangely wide-awake. The few hours' sleep she had enjoyed before the meeting in the boys' room had freshened her and now her mind was so active that she would have liked to have gone on talking. But Penny was asleep in a few minutes and no company at all, so she tossed and turned on her pillow thinking again of all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

Suddenly there was a new sound in the night. Far, far away she heard the faint, pulsating throb of the engine of a car. As soon as she sat up the silence of the night surged back again so that she wondered if her ears or brain were playing tricks. Then it came again and now it was nearer and there was a whine in the pulse of the heavy engine which told her that the car was coming up a hill. Or was it a car? She listened intently, as the sound became muffled again and then burst into new life. Now she could hear the rumble of heavy wheels coming rapidly closer, and suddenly she was sure of what she would see if she went to the window.

She was out of bed in a trice, and pushed up the window. The noise of the approaching engine was louder now and echoing back from the houses built close to Clun's little bridge. Peter leaned far out so that the bitter cold struck through her pyjamas and started her teeth chattering. Then a great lorry with only two small, dimmed headlights swung round into the main street. It was travelling dangerously fast but even as the red tail-light swung out of sight

round the corner she had recognized the van as the one she had met on the day she rode to Clun. But one thing was different. She was quite, quite certain that this time the lettering on the side of the van read "Thompsons of Manchester."

Peter had made up her mind even before she had closed the window. She ran over to Penny's bed.

"Wake up, Penny, Wake up. Don't make a noise, but wake up quickly. Please be quiet, Penny... Yes, it's me. It's Peter. Wake up... I'm sorry, Penny, but you *must*. This is something for the Lone Piners..."

At the last words Penny sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"I'm awake, I s'pose. It seemed to me that I've been woken up like this once before to-night. What's happened? Peter, why are you dressing?"

"Get up," Peter whispered. "Put on the warmest things you've got. I've just seen that furniture van again and I bet it's full of sheep, and we must go and warn the Dentons... This is a job for the Club, Penny, and we're all pledged to stick together, you know. Get up, I'm going to wake the boys."

Penny did not stop to argue, but had reached for her clothes before Peter had closed the door behind her.

Peter went boldly into the boys' room and switched on the light. She shook David first.

"Peter! What's wrong?"

She told him in a few words.

"Right," he said. "Wake Jenny. I'll see to Tom and Jon. Don't wake the twins. We'll be downstairs in the hall in five minutes. Good old Peter!"

And she was so pleased with this that she was thankful he could not hear her teeth chattering as she went back to the door. Penny was dressed by the time she had wakened Jenny and got back to her own room.

"Down in the hall," she whispered. "We'll all be there except the twins. Not a sound."

Within five minutes they were all down. Jenny looked as if she was walking in her sleep and Tom was obviously furious, but he grinned happily when David herded them all into the dining-room and began his whispered story.

"Peter has just seen that furniture van again. She says it was travelling fast, but she's certain it's the one she met the other day full of sheep. Peter says - and it's her idea, not mine, and she ought to be doing the talking..."

"*Go on, David!*" Peter implored.

"Peter says we ought to split up and try to warn the Dentons and any other farmers we can reach. I think it's a grand idea. We've all got bikes except Peter, and she's going on Sally to Bury Fields. Let's get out of here as quickly and quietly as we can, and we'll make further plans as we go up the hill. We can't cycle up that. Come on... Bike shed next."

They crept out like guilty criminals, down the front steps and round the side of the house to the shed where Dickie had first found the bicycle with the jangling bell.

"There's going to be some trouble over all this," Tom muttered as he wheeled out his bicycle.

"Who from?" Jon whispered.

"Those twins! Just think what they're going to say when they find out we've deserted them. Where's Peter?"

"Gone for Sally," David said. "We're going to meet on the bridge. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Jenny's teeth were chattering again as they got on their bicycles and glided silently down the still moonlit street to the bridge. While they waited for Peter she stood close to Tom, and if for a moment she laid her cheek against the rough tweed of his coat-sleeve nobody noticed. She was not really

scared and was grateful for being included in the party, but she had made up her mind that she was not going to leave Tom for anything or anybody. Tom seemed to understand, for as the clip-clop of Sally's hooves came nearer he looked down at her and said, "We'll stick together, Jen."

At the top of the hill where the houses stopped they stood under the signpost and made their plans.

"We'll all meet here in two hours' time if we can," David said. "I think that's the best scheme. Peter is going on her own to Denton's because she'll be quicker on Sally than we shall on bikes. I suppose the rest of us had better split up and explore as much as we can, keeping a good look-out for anybody suspicious or for that van."

Tom interrupted, "You can split as much as you like, but Jenny and me aren't splitting!"

"I think the best idea," Penny said, "is for those of us with bikes to go together much farther down this lane till we come to the cross-roads we struck this afternoon where four roads meet. Some of us can stay on guard there and the rest can take it in turns to go off on bikes and keep a good look-out. Isn't that a better scheme than all meeting here, which is really too near the town?"

Jon patted her on the back.

"Smart, bright little Newpenny!"

She smiled at him as Peter said, "Of course. That's a brainwave. Agreed, David?"

"Rather! Let's go."

The moon was high in the sky and every trace of the evening's mist had gone, but it was bitterly cold.

"Just think," Tom said ten minutes later as he let his cycle fall on the frosty grass at the foot of the signpost. "Just think that we might all be in bed. I

was wondering just now, when I thought my ears had fallen off, how it was that Peter has persuaded us all to do this... What do we do now, David?"

David blew on his fingers.

"I thought you two girls might stay here on guard while we three went on a bit farther and then split up if we came to a likely path or saw a farmhouse."

"You're wrong," Penny said. "I don't want to be split, and I'll freeze to death if I stay here. I'm coming with whoever is on the attacking party."

"I'm going to be with Tom," Jenny said quite simply, and as Tom seemed to have no objection to the job of sentinel, this was soon settled.

Penny had the next adventure. She rode off in the moonlight down the road that the others had chosen for her, whistling cheerfully. This was the first time in her life that she had ever been out at half past two in the morning, and she was enjoying the experience. After a little she came to a steep hill with some trees at the bottom and was freewheeling blithely down this when a car came out of a hidden turning in the shadows and headed up towards her. Penny was so astonished that she put on her brakes too hard and felt the back wheel begin to slide on the slippery road surface. The car seemed to rush up to meet her, and although she wrenched at the handlebars, she felt herself slipping, and then fell in a heap with her bicycle on top of her.

After a moment she sat up and noticed that the car had stopped opposite and that a man was getting out. Suddenly she felt defenceless and afraid and wished that she was not out alone on this absurd adventure. Then, rather cautiously, she looked at the man in front of her and saw that he was studying her, too. He was small, and wearing a soft felt hat with the brim turned down all the way round and a heavy tweed overcoat. He had a rather fierce-looking moustache, which seemed too big for his face, and he was carrying something long under his arm. Suddenly Penny gasped and put a hand to her mouth. The "something" was undoubtedly a gun.

"Who are you?" the man barked suddenly. "Are you hurt? What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

Penny was playing for time. Should she make a dash for it? She gave a rather shaky laugh.

"That's not fair! I can't answer all those questions at once. And I don't like that gun thing."

"Where do you come from?" the little man barked again. "I don't know your face. Come here and let me look at you. What are you doing? Running away?"

Penny felt a lump rise in her throat. She was lonely and defenceless. Then she remembered she was a Lone Piner, swallowed the lump and held her chin high.

"Why should you know my face? Do you live here?"

"Live here? Of course I do. Lived here for fifty years... Now speak up and tell me who you are."

"I will if you will... No! Don't touch me! Keep away! I'm not afraid of you."

A noise came from under the moustache that might have been a laugh.

"All right, child, don't fear. I won't hurt you, but tell me what you're doing out here on a bicycle at this time in the morning, but be quick because I'm in a hurry. Have you met anybody on your way? Seen anybody driving sheep along?"

"No, I haven't," Penny said soberly. "But do please tell me who you are."

"Name of Clancy," he said. "Farmed here all my life."

Penny nearly sobbed with relief and her voice was very shaky as she said, "That's marvellous. I remember Alan Denton saying that name... Mr Clancy, I've got some news for you. Let me get in with you, and if you go up the hill and about two miles farther on you'll come to a signpost and the others will be there... Oh! I should have asked you this first. Are all your sheep safe? If you have any, I mean. We've all come out to warn you..."

"Jump in beside me," Mr Clancy ordered. "Leave your cycle and I'll get it for you some time. Sounds crazy to me, but tell me what you know as we go... I've lost fifty sheep this night."

Penny did her best to explain as they rattled along the empty road, but she realized that her story was rather confused.

Mr Clancy grunted.

"I've had no sleep for three nights and reckon I must have dropped off for an hour or two to-night," he muttered, almost to himself. "They could do the trick with a lorry or van somewhere near, o' course. Well, young lady, I don't know what to make of your story, but I was on my way to pick up young Denton. Now here's the cross-roads, and by the looks of it there's some of your crazy friends too, so I reckon what you've told me is the truth."

Before Penny could answer he stopped the car as Tom and Jon stepped into the road in front of it.

Penny jumped out. "It's all right, Jon; it's me. And this is Mr Clancy, the farmer, and he's had fifty sheep stolen to-night... Where's David? Has anyone else been along?"

Jenny, who was leaning against the signpost, spoke up.

"No, Penny, nobody has come this way. You're the only one so far who has found anything."

Mr Clancy spoke again before Penny could answer. "I'm going down here to find young Denton. You say he knows all about you?"

"He does," Jon said. "We're all friends of his and we're trying to help him, and you, too, sir, if you'll let us... I think we've a clue over this sheep-stealing, but I agree that it is a good idea to try and find Mr Denton as well."

"I think he's coming now," Jenny said. "Or if it's not him it's Peter. I can hear horses... Oh, and here's David coming, too, and he looks out of breath and fed up."

David got off his bicycle and let it fall distastefully on to the grass verge, but before he could say anything they all heard the thudding of hooves and turned to see a man on a fine, slim horse come cantering up to the gate in the corner of the field. A hundred yards behind him came Peter. Alan slipped off his hunter when he saw Clancy.

"Hello!" he said. "Trouble?"

Clancy nodded and led him away out of earshot while the Lone Piners grouped themselves round the signpost.

"I met Alan just riding out of the farmyard," Peter explained. "He'd had some sleep and was just going on guard again and was surprised to see me... I think he's very pleased with us. He was decent when I told him about the van. What do we do now?"

"I hate to say it again," Tom replied, "but I'd really like to go to sleep. There's not much left of the night, and before we know where we are it'll be breakfast time."

"I do hope the twins haven't woken up and found us not there," Jenny said. "That would be awful..."

Then Alan and Mr Clancy came over.

"You youngsters must get back now," Alan said. "You've done grand work, and we all appreciate it very much. Mr Clancy and I are going to check up with the other farmers, and we shall try and get some sleep, too. We're not telling the police at the moment - not till we've found out something else we want to know. Gut back now and come and see us at Bury Fields whenever you feel like it. You'll always be welcome. Cheerio for the present, and thank you all."

"I'll send on your bicycle, young lady," Mr Clancy said. "And thanks to all. You're welcome over at Three Oaks any time."

Half asleep and bitterly cold, the Lone Piners went back to Keep View, crept up the stairs to their rooms and crawled into bed for the third time that night.

8. Into Action

The routine at Keep View was badly upset the next morning. Poor Agnes tried again and again to wake the Lone Piners, but only the twins came down for breakfast at the proper time.

"Just you go out there and bang that gong again, Richard," she said in despair as she put the plates of porridge in the hatch, "I don't know what's come over them all this morning... Anyone might think they'd all been up all night."

Mary smiled and then, as she realized the significance of the housekeeper's last words, looked over at her twin very meaningfully. But Dickie was only thinking of the gong and he strode out into the hall and picked up the great gong-stick lovingly. But Mary stopped him before he could strike the first blow.

"Just a minute, Dickie. Did you hear what Agnes said?"

"She said I could biff this old gong and I'm jolly well going to biff it off the stand. Watch me!"

"Stop a minute, Dickie. Agnes said that anyone might think the others had been up all night. I believe they have. I couldn't wake Jenny. Penny and Peter *can't* wake up. You tried the boys, didn't you?"

Dickie lowered the gong-stick.

"Do you really think they've been out somewhere without us all night, Mary?"

His twin nodded. "I bet they have."

Dickie ran for the stairs, flourishing the gong-stick.

"Come on!" he shouted. "I'll *beat* them out of their beds with this. We'll make them confess. We'll make them sorry to leave us out of things. The

great hulking beasts. Those boys are the worst. They're bullies. Come on!" and here he fell over the top stair with a crash, picked himself up and dashed along the landing until he reached David's room. Then, with Mary panting only a few steps behind him, he raised the gong-stick with both hands and crashed it against the panels of the door. During the brief silence that followed, a sleepy voice from inside the room muttered:

"All right. Thank you, Agnes. Shan't be a sec."

"Di-di-did you hear that, Mary?" Dickie stuttered with tears of fury in his eyes.

Mary nodded and flung open the door.

Jon was still sleeping, but it must have been David who had answered, for he stirred as the twins ran over to his bed.

"Get up, you beast," Dickie yelled as he snatched back the bedclothes. "Get up and tell us the truth... If you don't tell us everything we'll go straight down and tell Agnes you've been out all night. Have you?"

David sat up in astonishment.

"Hello, Dickie. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong!" his brother yelled. "It's past nine o'clock and you've been out all night without us and you've jolly well got to tell us what you've been doing this instant minute."

Mary watched her twin with astonishment and admiration. She had never seen him like this before and was enjoying it. Suddenly Dickie wheeled on her.

"Go and do the same to those girls," he shouted. "Yank 'em out of bed. Make them tell you. Chuck water at them. Go on! I'll do Tom next."

Mary ran.

David reached for the bedclothes and began to pull them round him.

"No, you don't," Dickie yelled as he fought to pull them down again. "You beast, David. Have you been out all night without us? Jus' tell me now. That's all we want to know. That's all I ask. Just tell me the truth."

David was wide awake now. He put out a strong arm and scooped up his small brother on to the bed.

"Steady, Richard!" came David's calm voice. "What's wrong? Just sober down and I'll tell you everything... Don't be a little idiot, Dickie... Stop struggling else you'll get hurt... That's better."

Then Jon sat up in bed.

"What's all the row about?"

Dickie stopped fighting. The truth was that he had a tremendous admiration for his brother and would have stood up to anybody in the world who dared to say anything against him.

"Well, David," he gulped. "It's time to get up and Agnes is mad with you and the porridge is getting cold and we want to know if you've been having adventures without us, 'cos if you have..."

David grinned, and pushed him off the bed.

"Just get off my legs and I'll get up... Jon! Get up and hurry. We'd better go down in our dressing-gowns."

"Well, have you?" Dickie persisted. "That's all I ask. Have you been out in the night without us?"

Before David could answer Jon reached for his glasses.

"Just trot off downstairs, Dickie, like a good little boy and we'll tell you all about it after breakfast."

"Don't you dare to call me a good little boy," Dickie spluttered. "You're the worst of the lot, Jon. I bet it was your idea to leave us behind. I loathe you. We both loathe you an'..."

David reached for his dressing-gown, put his hands on Dickie's shoulders and gently pushed him into the passage. At that moment there was a startled yell from the next room and Mary shot out and joined her twin.

"I did it, Dickie. I've *soused* them both with cold water. Jenny wasn't much trouble. She was *terrified* of me. She's getting up."

David shut the door behind him.

"Get on, you two, and no more nonsense. This is serious and you can really help us now. We'll tell you everything as soon as we can but it's up to you both now to do something for the Club... Go and keep Agnes quiet. Say we're very sorry and will be down in five minutes, and if Mr Cantor is in the dining-room get him out of the way so that we can talk. We shall want your help badly to-day and I promise we'll tell you everything. Do this for us, twins, will you?" Mary looked him straight in the eyes, reached for Dickie's hand - something she did now only when it was very important - and led him downstairs.

A few minutes later six woe-begone and bedraggled Lone Piners joined the twins at the breakfast table. Mr Cantor, after a very curious glance, passed them in the hall as they came downstairs. They all muttered a greeting and slipped into the room, hoping that Agnes would not be waiting for them. Dickie and Mary had done their work well, for they were alone and their porridge was served.

"Now then," Dickie said. "Buck up and tell us. We've let you off this time, but we won't again."

Mary giggled. "You do all look funny! At least, most of you look awful. What's the matter with your hair, Penny? Have you been out swimming?"

Penny's eyes widened. It was a long time since she had been awakened with cold water and she was not feeling her best.

"For goodness' sake let's sit down and have breakfast and do the squabbling afterwards," Peter suggested. "Is Agnes very mad with us?"

"She was," Dickie said, "but I think we've fixed her. You've got to be thankful to us for that... Come on then - let's start."

In between mouthfuls of food, David told the twins of the night's adventures. He was often interrupted because they were determined to keep Agnes out of the dining-room if they could and the only way to do this was to keep running to the kitchen and waiting on themselves.

"... Then Penny had an adventure on her own and she'll tell you that when her mouth is empty. But you do see, twins, don't you, that we couldn't very well drag you in as well?"

"We don't see," Mary said tersely. "You didn't even ask us to the meeting and we're going to make a new rule which says a meeting isn't a meeting at all unless we're all there."

"If we don't get that rule in," Dickie added, "we're through... We'll bust it all up."

David looked helplessly at Peter who had so often saved such a situation.

"Listen, twins," she said, "I know you're mad with us and we all know why. But just think for a minute. It looks as if we're in for just about the biggest adventure we've ever had, and when I saw that van again last night I knew we'd got to do something quickly and quietly, but we've hardly done a thing yet. We didn't have a proper Club meeting last night or else you'd have been there, but it was you, Dickie, and your cleverness, that got us on to the track of Mr Cantor and there's lots more important things for you and Mary to do, aren't there, David?"

David nodded in silent admiration.

"The truth is," Peter went on before either of the twins could speak, "that we are all tired out this morning, and there wasn't any sense last night in tiring everybody. We've got to have some reserves you know. Every general who fights a battle has to have reserves, doesn't he, Jon?"

"He does," Jon agreed solemnly. "Definitely he does. And in this case the twins are our reserves."

"Jolly lucky we've got them," Penny murmured.

"No good without 'em," Tom put in.

"So you see, twins," Peter continued hurriedly, "that we can't do without you and that it's lucky for us that you're fresh and strong and cunning this morning... Now let's clear away these things and make ourselves look a bit respectable..."

Before the twins could reply to Peter there was an extraordinary interruption. Macbeth, from the hearth-rug, suddenly growled and Mary pointed dramatically to the window.

"Look!" she squealed. "A policeman."

Jon jumped up.

"I'll go," he said quietly, and then from outside in the hall they heard him call up the stairs, "Don't bother, Agnes. I'll go. I saw who it was."

Then they heard the front door open and the rumble of voices. But before any of them could say anything the door opened again and Jon came in followed by a very large policeman.

"The constable," Jon announced, "is making some inquiries and thinks some of us may be able to help him."

"This is just a matter o' routine as you might say," began the policeman, "and knowing you youngsters were getting around a bit I am acting from instructions received and am to inquire if any of you have seen a gipsy's caravan in these parts?"

The Lone Piners looked at him in astonishment and Mackie growled as the door opened quietly and Mr Cantor came in.

There was a long silence. Eventually Mr Cantor cleared his throat softly and said, "Dear me! How very remarkable. A police constable to be sure, and at breakfast too - how very odd! Can I be of any assistance to you, constable? My name is Cantor and I am staying here on vacation for a short while."

"Thank you, sir, but I was just inquiring whether any of these young people happened to have seen a caravan about these parts-and most partickeler a red and yellow caravan," he finished unexpectedly.

"And are the dwellers in the red and yellow caravan wanted by the police?" Mr Cantor asked.

"I have been instructed to make general inquiries, sir, regarding any caravans and this one in partickeler."

"Then perhaps I can be of assistance to you, constable It so happens that I did see a red and yellow caravan yesterday on the hills up by the stone circle... It would perhaps be more seemly if I stepped along and saw you and gave you full details. I shall be very pleased to do so for if there is trouble I am convinced that gipsies will be involved."

"That's not true!" Peter said angrily. "We know two gipsies who live in a red and yellow caravan and they're the very finest people. It's just not fair to say that, Mr Cantor... And anyway the caravan we know is miles away by now. You don't want to waste your time looking for gipsies, Mr Policeman! You look for furniture vans that drive about here in the middle of the night if you want to find the stolen sheep."

"This is very interesting," Mr Cantor said after another shocked silence. "Perhaps you could explain yourself, Petronella? What is all this about sheep stealing? Perhaps you can enlighten us, constable?"

"Well, sir, I can't say that's rightly in my province as you might say. What I got to do is to make general inquiries about this caravan, and here's this young lady says it was seen going *away* and you now tells me you saw it right handy here, and it don't make sense to me."

"But I do assure you, my dear man," Mr Cantor began testily, and then was interrupted by David-

"Excuse me, sir, but I do think we're wasting a lot of the constable's time and I expect he's very busy." He turned to the policeman. "I think we can tell you about the gipsy caravan we saw two days ago, but I think you should tell us why you want to know. We've got some good gipsy friends and whatever Mr Cantor says every single one of us here, and our parents too, will tell you they'd never steal."

Then he turned to Mr Cantor, who was still standing just inside the door. "And I think we ought to tell you, sir, in case the policeman won't, that we know there is sheep stealing going on all round the country here and two decent gipsies in a caravan couldn't possibly organize that!"

"And we're not going to have our friends accused of being thieves when they're not here to prove they're not," Peter said impetuously. "It's just not fair. Anyway, we know how the sheep are being stolen. I tell you I saw that furniture van myself last night."

Then, before Jon could stop her - and he tried to interrupt - Peter poured out the story of the van and the two rough men she had met on her journey to Clun, and of the van she had seen last night in the moonlight.

"How do you know it; was the same van?" Mr Cantor asked quietly.

"Well, I don't know for certain," Peter admitted, "but it looked the same shape although the one last night had Manchester on the side and the first one had another name... At least I think it did."

Mr Cantor glanced significantly at the policeman, who now looked more bewildered than ever but shut up his notebook.

"I'll be glad if you'd step in at my house some time, sir," he said. "At your convenience o' course. I have the young lady's statement about when the caravan was first seen..."

"But aren't you going to do anything about the van?" Peter gasped. "Don't you believe me?"

Mr Cantor opened the door.

"If you will just direct me to your house, constable," he said, "I will make a point of coming along to have a word with you later." Then he turned to the Lone Piners grouped round the fire and spoke specially to Peter. "Of course, my dear young lady, we all believe you met a van and two men on your way here. Of course we do."

"But last night," Peter repeated. "I saw it again last night, I tell you, some time after midnight. It was rushing up the street outside. I saw it clearly."

Mr Cantor smiled gently. "Quite so, my dear. You thought you saw it, but nobody else did. You were tired out after a long day and dreamed it no doubt," and he closed the door behind the policeman, who followed him out.

"Did you hear what he said?" Peter gasped. "He called me a liar. I'll never, never forgive him. I hate him. David! Why don't you go after him and do something to him? Are you going to let him call me a liar?"

Even as she was speaking David strode across to the door, but Jon stopped him before he could open it.

"Just a sec," he said quietly. "Let's be sensible. We'll get our own back on him, Peter, don't you worry. Nobody is allowed to call a Lone Piner a liar and get away with it, are they, Dickie?... Be quiet just for a minute and see what he's going to do, and then we'd better make our plans."

David went across to Peter and touched her arm.

"Sorry about that, Peter. Jon's right, though. We won't forget. I won't forget, I promise."

She gave him a grateful glance and then turned away so that he could not see the tears in her eyes as Jon, his ear against the closed door, whispered,

"He's shut the front door and gone upstairs, and I bet he doesn't want to see us again for a little. Now, David, what's the best thing to do?"

"We'd better get dressed first," David replied, "and while we're doing it will you girls do everything you can to keep Agnes sweet?"

Fifteen minutes later the dining-room was clear and the beds made and all the Lone Piners, including Macbeth, were climbing the Castle hill. The morning was bright and cold and a steady wind seemed to blow their fatigue and short temper away. The twins and Tom were teasing Mackie with a piece of stick and Jenny's gay laughter at their antics echoed back from the ruins above them. Only Peter looked depressed, for try as she would she could not forget the cruel, unfair way in which Mr Cantor had sneered at her.

"David," she said suddenly, "I've had an awful idea. We've all walked out of the house to make some plans and left Mr Cantor alone and unguarded."

"You're right, Peter! What fools we are. If I'd thought for a minute I'd have realized that and we'd have met in one of the bedrooms and kept a look-out for him... We'd better go back at once."

"Let's talk now," Jon said. "Peter may be right, but I've had enough of Keep View this morning, and it's grand out here. Let's chance Mr Cantor for a few minutes just for the sake of some fresh air."

But it was another twenty minutes before they agreed on a plan, and then it was really three separate plans.

"It's no use us trying to do everything together," David said. "We've got too many things to do and too many people to watch. I'm sure Peter is right and that Mr Cantor should be shadowed every minute. Everything about him is suspicious, and he behaved disgustingly this morning when he tried, first of all, to blame Reuben and Miranda for something he knew nothing about..."

"Or pretended he knew nothing about," Penny put in.

"... Yes, that's true enough. Maybe he knew more than we think. Then there was that business of getting the policeman away from us so that we shouldn't tell him any more."

"P'raps we should go back and tell him some more," Jenny suggested.

"Alan told us not to go to the police," Jon said, "and now I've seen the policeman I'm not surprised! David and Peter are right when they say Cantor has got to be watched, and I know who ought to watch him."

"Not me," Penny said promptly. "I'm sick of him."

"Not you," Jon agreed. "We want somebody with more guile than you've got. No, this is a job for the twins."

And so it was agreed.

"Shall we go at once?" Mary said. "Suppose he's escaped us already? And what are you others going to do, and how shall we know where you are?"

"Whatever we do we shall have to go back to the house," David said, "because if we go out on the hills again, which I think we should, we must tell Agnes we'll be out all day and get some food... I'm not very keen to be the one to tell Agnes, by the way."

"The only ones she likes are the twins," Peter said. "They're the favourites; they always were. I suggest they and Mackie go back at once. If Mr Cantor has gone out they'll soon know, and it will be up to them to try and follow him. It's an important job, Dickie. Can you manage it? All right, we know you can! Whatever we all do, let's arrange to meet here, at H.Q.. Three, at sunset. If Cantor is in, twins, when we get back we shall understand if you don't leave him and we won't come into the room and interfere if we can help it."

Dickie cocked his head and spoke gruffly out of the side of his mouth. "O.K., pards. Leave it to us! The ruins at sunset," and set off down the hill. Mary turned and waved as she followed him.

"Try and let us know what you're all going to do," she called.

After a little more discussion it was agreed that the three girls should go over to Bury Fields and see if they could do anything to help the Dentons.

"At any rate Mrs Denton will be pleased to see us," Penny said, "and we can tell Alan all about Mr Cantor. Do you think we should do that, David? Shall we tell him how he behaved to the policeman?"

"I don't see why not. Tell him the whole story and that we'll do anything we can to help them."

"That's all very well," Tom said, "but we've got to sleep some time. Don't think I'm not enjoying myself, because I am, but for goodness' sake don't suggest that I sit up on guard again all night."

"What are you boys going to do, then?" Peter asked.

"We'll explore in daylight as much as we can. We'll look for signs of that van of yours, Peter, and if we get a chance I want to go back to that house with the grey walls and see if I can find out who lives there... Anyway, we all meet here, whatever happens, at sunset."

As they walked up the steps of Keep View they caught sight of Mary through the lounge windows. They could not be sure, but it looked as if she was sitting on the arm of Mr Cantor's chair by the fire.

Macbeth barked as they crept into the hall and then Dickie slipped round the door.

"O.K.," he whispered out of the side of his mouth. "We got him. He's hardly struggling yet. He's telling Mary a story - a FAIRY STORY!" and he almost collapsed with stifled laughter. When he had recovered he winked broadly and said, "And what are you going to do?"

They beckoned him to the foot of the stairs, whispered their plans and pushed him back to the lounge. As he opened the door they heard Mary's clear voice saying:

"Oh, Mr Cantor! How absolutely wizard! I mean he was a wizard wizard in that story, wasn't he?..."

Half an hour later the girls came out of the kitchen triumphantly laden with packets of sandwiches and flasks of hot coffee. They had agreed that bicycles would be more trouble than they were worth, so they walked steadily until they reached the signpost at the cross-roads where they had all met in the early hours of the morning.

"Looks different now," David said, "but do you girls think you can find your way? I've found that 'Grey Walls' place on the map, and we're going to go there presently and see if anything happens. But if you don't mind I think I ought to keep the map... I don't see how you can find us if you want us, unless Alan can tell you how to get to 'Grey Walls' from his place. Come to think of it, though, you might upset something if you appeared on the scene, so you'd better keep away... We all meet as arranged. Good luck!"

"Good luck to you," the girls called as they went on their way.

"Do you think we ought to have our sandwiches before we get to Bury Fields?" Jenny said.

They agreed to eat first and eventually they found a little hollow on a hill-top. The cold wind whistled over their heads, but they were protected from it, and as the hollow was a sun-trap, they lay back on cushions of heather. Penny broke off a sprig and put it in her hair.

"Do you realize how dry this is?" she said. "I bet it's as dry as it is in summer and with this wind it would burn more quickly."

They talked for a little, and then not surprisingly they went to sleep. They all slept so soundly that the motor-cycle carrying a man wearing dark goggles which bumped along the track not many yards away did not wake them until he was out of sight. Then Penny looked at her watch and found that it was nearly two o'clock.

"We'd better go. Come on."

Within quarter of an hour they were at the top of the hill overlooking the farmyard of Bury Fields.

Peter strained her eyes.

"There's something black against the wall of the barn just inside the gate," she said. "I'm sure it wasn't there yesterday, or else it's something that's been moved."

When they got a little nearer they saw that the black object was a motor-cycle, and then suddenly they noticed a figure, which was probably the rider, cross the yard. There was something furtive about the way in which he walked that made the girls quicken their pace and then start to run down the hill. The man disappeared round one side of the house and then reappeared by the back door just as they reached the farmyard gate. The door must have been open, for they could hear Mrs Denton's agitated voice.

"You get out of here, Sam Quickset. You wouldn't dare come into the yard if Mr Alan was at home, and you know you wouldn't... What are you doing in these parts I'd like to know...? And don't you dare to threaten me either... Just get off these premises."

Even while she was speaking, Penny, followed closely by the other two, dashed into the kitchen. Mrs Denton was standing with her back to the fire facing a man in a dirty cycling suit and leather helmet. He wheeled round to face the girls as they ran in. Penny's temper was up and she faced the intruder as if she was as big as he was.

"Just you get out!" she stormed. "Get out now before Mr Denton catches you here. Don't you worry, Mrs Denton. Alan is on his way down. We were talking to him just now."

The man turned and brushed past Peter and Jenny and dashed out into the yard. The engine of the motor-cycle started into life with a roar, and then they watched him wobble out of the gate and disappear round the corner of the house.

"He didn't like us much, did he?" Jenny said.

"Thank you, my dears," Mrs Denton said. "That was well done. Have you really seen my son?"

Penny shook her head. "Sorry, I made that up. I heard you say that he wouldn't dare appear if Alan was here. Who is that man? He looks horrid."

"He is, my dear. He's a real bad lot. Name of Sam Quickset, and used to work for us. We caught him stealing more than once, but we had nobody else to help just then and we gave him another chance, but he was worse next time, so Alan threw him out when he was rude to me. He's a bad lot, and he swore he'd never forget and that he'd get his own back one day. I'm right thankful you came in when you did. And now sit you all down and make yourselves comfortable, and there'll be a cup of tea in a minute... Are you all right, Peter?" Mrs Denton suddenly asked.

Peter sat down thankfully and said she was all right. "Just puffed a bit with running."

As Mrs Denton went to make tea, Penny came over to Peter.

"What's wrong, Peter? You look awful."

"Sorry, Penny. I'm all right, really. Just a bit of a shock. That man on the motor-bike was the driver of the van I met on the way to Clun. I'd recognize his squint anywhere."

9. Offa's Dyke

The Lone Piners had at least half an hour's start before Mr Cantor managed to get out of his chair and walk over to the window.

"It seems to be a very pleasant, bright day now," he said to the twins, "and although I enjoy your most entertaining company I think I will be taking some exercise before the sun goes in."

"Oh, Mr Cantor," Mary wailed, "are you really going to leave us just when we were enjoying ourselves so much?"

Dickie agreed fervently, and then added, "Where were you thinking of going, sir? This is just about the time we take Mackie for a walk, so perhaps we could go together."

"I don't think so, Richard," Mr Cantor said hurriedly, "I would rather take my walk by myself, thank you."

"Oh Mr Cantor!" Mary said as she sidled up to him. "Is the walk you're going really private? Don't you really want us to come with you?"

"I don't think you'd better come with me, my dears. I may be going for quite a long walk and I shouldn't like to get you into trouble by taking you too far."

"Please don't worry about that, sir," Dickie broke in. "We like long walks and you won't tire us out. We're used to long walks and Mackie always comes, too. Although he's quite a small dog and his legs are so short he can go a very long way... Acksherly we have to give him a lot of exercise and he's just got to have some to-day."

"So if you wouldn't really mind, dear Mr Cantor," Mary went on, "we would like it very much if you'd let us come with you... We were hoping that you could spare a scrap of time to show us some of the exciting places round here that you told us about the other day... O' course if you *really*

wanted to do anything very private we'd just disappear quietly, wouldn't we, Dickie?"

"We wouldn't be in the way for anything," her twin agreed.

There was a long silence while Mr Cantor looked at the two of them; and just for a second or two Mary, who met his eyes steadfastly, had that same odd feeling that he was somebody else - or almost that he was two different people. Then he smiled and said, "Very well - you shall come with me. You shall help me explore and we will look for arrowheads. Let us ask the housekeeper for an early lunch."

Mary was thanking Mr Cantor effusively when Dickie had another idea. Perhaps Mr Cantor thought that if he promised them his company after lunch this would keep them quiet until then, while he slipped off to his room and planned something else. At all costs Dickie felt that they should go out together now before he changed his mind or escaped from them.

"Let's start *now*, sir. While the sun is out and it's not too cold-" he suggested.

"You must take care of yourself, Mr Cantor," Mary broke in. "We shall never forgive ourselves if your cold got worse."

"It's better to go out in the fresh air with a cold," Dickie continued hurriedly. "Mother always says that, unless you've got a temperature and we're sure you haven't got that... No, sir, please let's go now and have our lunch at an inn."

"But that's a marvellous idea, Dickie," Mary said. "*Please*, Mr Cantor, let's do that. There's a funny old inn on the road that leads up to the hills. I'd love to go in that. We could pretend we're weary travellers whose coach has broken down or been robbed by a masked highwayman, and that reaching the inn has saved our lives."

Mr Cantor looked at her in surprise and then smiled again.

"That is a good idea, Richard," he said. "Wait here and I will be ready in five minutes. Will one of you tell Agnes that we shall be out to lunch?"

"Can I come up to your room and help you pack or anything?" Dickie asked as he edged towards the door.

"No," Mr Cantor said tersely for once. "You may not. Stay where you are."

Dickie flopped on the sofa as soon as Mr Cantor had closed the door behind him.

"This is an awful strain, twin," he gasped, "Slip out and see if he's really going into his room."

Mary was back in thirty seconds.

"He's gone in and I heard him lock the door. Oh, Dickie! Do you think we've done the right thing so far? Do you think the others will think we're all right? We are doing all right, aren't we?"

"Well, we can't break down the door of his room," Dickie said reluctantly. "I wish we could. That would be fun... Do you know, twin, I think he quite likes us."

"Do you?" Mary replied, "I shouldn't think he could. I don't think I would if I was him... Do you think he's escaping out of the window?... Quick, Dickie. You go outside and watch his window and I'll go and play about on the landing just in case he does come out and really means to take us with him."

But Mr Cantor did keep his word and when the three of them, and Macbeth, went out into the sunshine the clock on the church was striking noon. They crossed the bridge, and as they trudged up the long hill, Mr Cantor told them stories of the border lands of Wales and England which are called the Welsh Marches.

The Plough and Harrow fitted Mary's description exactly. From the outside it looked as if it was falling to pieces and the old signboard creaked eerily in

the wind as they stood wondering whether anyone had ever ventured over the threshold before.

"I don't like it so much now I'm here," Mary admitted. "I wonder if they'll let us in?"

Mr Cantor then tried the door which, to their surprise, was not locked and led the way into a stone-flagged passage. On the right they saw the flicker of flames through an open door and, with a cry of delight, Mary slipped ahead and sat down on a stool right inside a great fireplace as big as a small room, in which a fire of logs was burning. An old woman stepped into the room behind them and looked at the children as if she did not like them there. Mr Cantor went out into the passage with her and closed the door, and strain their ears as they would, the twins could hear nothing beyond the rumble of voices.

"What shall we do?" Dickie hissed. "D'you think he's in league with her? We must listen to them somehow."

Mary looked worried.

"We can't do that, Dickie. Don't be so silly. If we go out we shall give the game away... I say, Dickie, I'm not enjoying this adventure 'cos I'm beginning to like him."

"Like him?" her twin snorted. "How could you like a beast like that? Have you forgotten what he said about Reuben and Miranda?... I wish I knew what he's talking about."

He must have raised his voice for the last sentence for Mr Cantor heard it as he opened the door. He smiled at Dickie, who fidgeted uncomfortably, as he said, "I can tell you that, Richard. I was talking about something to eat. That good woman has promised to find us some food."

"She doesn't look good to me," Mary said. "I think she looks like a witch. I bet she puts a spell on us so that we can't move from this place and only a fairy prince can rescue me... P'raps you're a fairy prince in disguise, Mr Cantor?"

Their host looked really startled at this and dropped the pipe he was filling. Dickie dashed over to pick it up, but Mary noticed his strange look at her innocent remark.

They sat, an odd-looking trio, in the fireplace and enjoyed their cold lunch. Mackie had his share too and then lay with his nose on his paws, while Dickie and Mary sipped their hot, strong tea and Mr Cantor puffed his pipe. The flickering firelight glinted on his glasses as he turned to answer Dickie, who said:

"Can we walk along Offa's Dyke this afternoon? Will you show us that, please?"

"Why not indeed?"

So, a little later, they said "Good-bye" to the witch, who actually smiled at the twins and did a sort of curtsy to Mr Cantor who whispered something to her and then slipped a piece of paper into her hand. Both Dickie and Mary were very quiet as they walked on for they had seen him do this and did not like it. Somehow they both began to feel that they were not finding out very much about their victim, who seemed to be too clever for them.

Although he kept on talking as they walked - and everything he said was interesting - they did both notice that Mr Cantor was always looking about him very keenly. Once, after they had left the road and were walking on a track crossing a bare hillside, Mary interrupted him to say:

"What do you keep looking for, Mr Cantor? You're looking on the ground all the time you're talking."

"Arrowheads, my dear. You look too. You wanted one for yourself, didn't you?"

"You don't mind if I don't, do you, sir?" Dickie said. "We can't all be looking on the ground all the time, else we shan't get anywhere."

Soon after this they reached the top of a little hill and paused under two tall fir trees.

"Now," said Mr Cantor, "if I have brought you the right way by the map we should see the dyke from here."

"I see it," Mary said quietly. "It's grand. Look, Dickie!"

North and south of them for as far as they could see stretched the shape of the earthen wall with a deep ditch on the Welsh side that was built by an army of slaves over a thousand years ago.

"See how it goes up and down the hills but keeps straight," Dickie said. "Let's go and walk on it. You promised that we could, Mr Cantor," and he dashed off down the hill with Mary and Macbeth at his heels. Not until they had scrambled through the dead, brown bracken in the great ditch did they realize that Mr Cantor was no longer with them.

"P'raps we'll see him when we get to the top," Mary gasped as she pulled herself up the steep sides of the bank, but when they reached the top and looked back at the two fir trees there was no sign of their guide.

"He's vanished, Mary. Or do you think he's tricked us? But where could he go?"

Before Mary could answer Macbeth yelped excitedly from somewhere below them.

"Come here, Mackie," Dickie called. "You know you can never catch rabbits. Come here!"

But Mackie barked again and again, and Mary said, "I don't think it's a rabbit, Dickie. He sounds as if he's found something. Let's go down and see."

"It's more fun up here," Dickie complained. "Don't worry about him, Mary. He'll find us when he's ready... I wish I knew where old Cantor has gone. He's much more important."

"And why is old Cantor so important, may I inquire?" said a voice behind them, and they both reddened with shame as they turned and saw that their

companion must have climbed the other side of the bank while they were calling Macbeth. He stood still, looking at them very seriously, and they both agreed later that he had really been very decent about Dickie's rudeness. Mary started to make some sort of lame excuse and then the dog started barking again and Mr Cantor said quietly, "Never mind that, Mary. What has your dog found? He sounds excited."

His voice sounded different. Firmer, more definite and not so much the voice of the elderly gentleman.

Dickie started to apologize. "I'm really very sorry."

"All right, Dickie" - and for the first time he said, Dickie and not Richard - "never mind that. Just run down there and see what's the matter with your dog."

The twins glanced at each other and obeyed. Mackie was still barking and as they turned in his direction Mary said suddenly, "Look, Dickie. This is funny. There's a little path here... I mean it looks as if it's been used a lot. It's quite smooth."

"I wonder why there's a path here?" Dickie said. "P'raps Mackie has found something after all... I say, Mary, is Mr Cantor" - and he said Mister Cantor this time - "is Mr Cantor still there? Don't let's both look. You look."

Mary glanced back. "Yes, he is. He's standing still watching us. I'll wave."

"Find the dog!" came his voice from above. Macbeth barked again in answer to Mary's call, so they hurried along the little track which twisted and turned between the bracken and heather. Suddenly Macbeth hurled himself at them, jumped up, licked their knees and urged them both to follow him. A few more yards and they shared his unpleasant discovery, which was a dead sheep lying beside the track.

"It looks very dead, twin," Mary said at last.

"Not very long, I should think," Dickie replied doubtfully. "Somehow it looks sort of newly dead. I don't like it much."

"It's got a big A.D. painted on its side," Mary added. "I'm sorry for the poor thing. I wonder what killed it? Or p'raps it was just ill?... Mackie, darling! You made a lot of fuss about one dead sheep, didn't you?... Come on, Dickie. Let's get back. I don't like this."

"All right," her brother said slowly. "I don't like it either... Mary, just a sec! I think Mackie is interested in something else. He keeps on fidgetin' around... Shall we explore a bit further down this path?"

Mary shivered. "No. Let's go back and find Mr Cantor. I don't like this place and I hate the wind."

Before Dickie could answer Mr Cantor hailed them.

"What have you found, children? What about the dog?"

Dickie turned and called, "All right, sir. We're coming back. Only a dead sheep."

Mr Cantor shouted back.

"Stay where you are. I'm coming down."

But Dickie was still looking uneasy and puzzled. Macbeth too was very restless, and although he came back when he was called, he kept ranging round and sniffing along the track as if there was something else that he had to discover.

Suddenly he cocked his head, whined softly and barked just once.

Dickie looked down at him with interest.

"He can hear something, Mary! Listen!"

They stood still. Above them the bitter wind stirred the dead bracken fronds and rustled through the dry heather. Once, twice came the distant sound of Mr Cantor's descent into the ditch. Macbeth whined again, and then they heard what he heard. Faint, from very far away it seemed, there came to them on the wind the sound of sheep bleating. They looked at each other

without words as Macbeth barked again and dashed away down the track. Then Mr Cantor called to them. Mary answered in rather a shaky voice and Dickie said, out of the side of his mouth, "What shall we do, Mary? Shall we tell him? We must follow Mackie and get him back."

Mr Cantor was puffing rather heavily when he joined them. When he saw the sheep he took off his glasses and looked at it very carefully.

"So that is what your dog found? Where is he now?"

"He's run off down the path there," Mary said. "He's excited... P'raps he's found something else."

"Let's go and see," Mr Cantor said in a voice which suddenly seemed quite different from his Keep View voice and they both turned obediently.

They walked a pace or two ahead of him down the unknown track but stopped when he said suddenly, "That man... That sheep farmer you know and went to warn last night. What's his name?"

"Alan Denton," Dickie said.

"Yes, of course. A.D."

And just when they both realized that the dead sheep was probably one of those stolen from Alan, they all heard again, quite clearly, the bleating of sheep, followed by Macbeth's excited bark.

Mr Cantor cocked his head and smiled grimly.

"Buck up, kids," he said briskly. "Find that wonder dog of yours and the sheep he's found. Go on! Don't stand there gaping at me... Or let me get in front. I think maybe I'd better."

They were both staring at him in astonishment, for suddenly the Mr Cantor they had known had disappeared and in some miraculous way a stranger had taken his place. They had no time to decide whether they liked this stranger or not, but he seemed to have a mind of his own so they turned and

dashed up the track so that they should be the first to share Macbeth's new discovery.

They stopped short at the edge of a flat circle of grass which had been trodden and soiled by sheep. At the far side of the little clearing Macbeth was standing before a hurdle intertwined with bracken and heather and barking furiously.

Mr Cantor joined the twins and stood still looking keenly about him while Mary dashed forward and picked up the protesting little dog.

"Look!" she called over her shoulder. "There's millions of sheep in here. Somebody has made a roof of these hurdle things and covered it all over with heather. It's all disguised and secret. Isn't Mackie a clever little darling to find it?"

"He is," Mr Cantor said quite grimly. "He certainly is. I shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't get a medal - and both of you, too!"

"I think we've found the stolen sheep, haven't we, Mr Cantor?" Dickie asked. "It's lucky we came to Offa's Dyke, isn't it? I s'pose we should go back and tell that policeman."

"I think so, Dickie," Mr Cantor said solemnly. "I think perhaps it's time the police knew all about this. Come on."

The next half-hour was a nightmare to the twins. Within five minutes they were too tired to protest and could only follow Mr Cantor as he trotted back the way they had come.

He really got along very quickly and it was soon obvious that he was not nearly as old as he had pretended to be at Keep View. Indeed it was soon obvious that he was not what he had pretended to be at all! They reached the road at last and turned in the direction of Clun, and after only a few minutes they heard a car coming along behind them.

"Stand each side of the road and put your hands out," Mr Cantor ordered. "We've got to stop him."

The car pulled up at their signal and Mr Cantor stepped forward.

"Sorry," he said, "but thanks for stopping. Take us into Clun as quickly as you can, please."

The man in the driving seat looked surprised at the tone of voice and was about to protest when Mr Cantor put a hand in his waistcoat pocket and produced something which the children could not see. But they did hear him say "Police" and "Hurry" before they were bundled into the back seat and Mr Cantor got in next to the driver.

"Gosh!" Dickie whispered. "He's a detective. A real one. I've never met one before!..."

"I think after all he's turned out to be nice," Mary murmured. "I like dashing along like this, Dickie. It's fun! Here's the bridge already... Look! He's stopping outside the policeman's house, so it must be true I suppose."

Then they found themselves on the pavement and Mr Cantor spoke in his old voice.

"I am deeply indebted to you, Richard and Mary, for a most interesting and instructive afternoon. I shall see you all soon doubtless, but now I must fulfil the promise I made to the policeman this morning. Good day and thank you for your courtesy," he added to the mystified car driver.

The twins watched the door of the policeman's house close behind Mr Cantor and then looked at each other in triumph.

"It was all worth it," Dickie said. "Just think of their faces when we tell 'em... Think of Jon's face when he knows that Mr Cantor was a detective all the time."

"Think how they'll look when we tell them how we found out!"

"Think how mad they'll be when they know it was Mackie and us who found the place where they hide the sheep... Oh, Mary! What a smashing day it's been."

"'Tisn't over yet, Dickie... Let's go up to the ruins... It's getting dark so it must be time to meet the others. Come on... You'll have to walk now, Mackie. I can't carry you any further."

They trudged up the hill in the dusk while the cruel, cold wind sang through the ruins of the Keep. Macbeth bounded ahead with a joyful bark and they heard a welcoming call which sounded like Jenny's. Two minutes later they found the three girls, crouched down behind a great buttress, but warm and out of the wind.

"Well?" both parties said simultaneously when they were near enough, and then Dickie grinned and said, "Where are the others hiding, anyway? Don't fool about because we're weary and we've got the most terrific story to tell you... But we must wait for the others."

They waited behind their buttress while an angry sun sank into the west. The cold increased and they lit a little fire of twigs to keep them warm. The girls were soon aware that the twins had a secret, but they could not persuade them to tell it until the boys came.

Peter looked at her watch, "I'm worried. They're over an hour late and now it's dark and getting colder. What shall we do?... I do wish they'd come."

10. The Boys' Adventure

As soon as they had left the girls, David, Jon and Tom set out for the mysterious house with the grey walls. They strode along with their hands in their pockets, for the wind was bitterly cold, and when Tom was not whistling he was yawning.

"It's no use," he said when they were rude to him, "I just can't help it. I could go to sleep right here... In this adventure we don't seem to do anything else but be yanked out of bed and walk or bike madly about in the cold... I'm fed up with it."

"We ought not to be far from that little wood now," David said after a few more minutes. "Have a look at the map, Jon. I think we're on the right trail."

"Not on your life!" Jon replied. "You're doing the map. If we're lost I'm not going to have anything to do with it, are you, Tom?... Besides, three people reading a map is always a hopeless mess... A glance round the countryside just now made me feel that we might be in the middle of the Sahara desert in winter-time - if it has a winter. This is the rummest country I've ever been in. I don't like it much."

"Neither do I," Tom said. "I keep on telling you I couldn't care less about it... I wonder how the twins are getting on with old man Cantor? I bet they're giving him a marvellous time..." He suddenly stopped and said, "Jon, David, look at the ground here carefully. I'd swear that these marks are the tracks left by the wheels of a big lorry."

"You're right," David said. "Now I know we're on the right road! Bet you these tracks lead us to the house."

Five minutes later they reached the little clump of fir trees and soon they were looking down on the mysterious grey walls.

"Let's go down," Tom said. "We shan't find out much from here, shall we? Let's make a row outside until they have to open the gates."

"Someone must live there," David replied; "and, anyway, we know that they do, and I've got the feeling now that someone is spying on us."

"Bet it's old Cantor," Jon said.

"If it is, then the twins are spying on him," was David's comment. "Look, both of you! The tracks here are clearer than ever, and I'm sure there are marks of car tyres as well."

"It's obvious enough," Jon said as he examined the tracks, "that if we are to fasten anything on to the people who live in that place we've got to have some proof of what they're up to... I mean it's no use going back to Alan Denton or to the police and saying that there are lorry tracks here."

"I'm sure the only way to do that is to get inside the place and see what's happening there," said David.

Tom laughed sarcastically. "You *are* bright, aren't you? And have you thought how we're going to get past those locked doors or climb those high walls with broken glass on the top?"

"Of course I have. I've just had the brainwave. There's only one way to get in, and that is when the gates are opened."

The others stopped and looked at him as if he was mad.

"I know! You needn't look like that. The way to get in is on the back of, or behind, a lorry when it comes down the track. I'm sure they do come down this way sometimes, and I'd bet that's just about the only time they open the gates. I think our best plan is to hide in the little wood, or, better still, much nearer the gates if we can get down there without being seen, and then when the lorry stops or slows down, try to hop on the back or slip in behind it. Are you game, and can you think of anything better?"

Jon shook his head. "I can't, and although it's crazy I'll have a go. I agree that it's the only way to get a chance of seeing inside. But I think it would be mad for all three to try and get in at the same time. Two's one too many

really, but then perhaps we ought to hunt in pairs, so maybe we'd better toss for it."

"I reckon I ought to be one of those who try it," Tom said. "It's my turn to have some fun, and I don't like sheep stealers. Let me go, anyway, David."

But before either of the others could answer Tom gave a whoop of joy and pounced on three empty milk bottles lying in the heather at the edge of the path just as they had been tossed by some lazy, careless picnicker in the past.

"I've got the idea," he shouted triumphantly. "Listen! Let's bust up those bottles and spread the broken glass in the track fairly near the gates, so that when the lorry comes the tyres are punctured and they just have to stop."

"Tom, you're a mastermind!" said Jon.

By now they had reached the shelter of the wood.

"Wait here a sec," David said, "and let's make sure that the coast is clear. It would spoil everything if they saw us."

It was nearly dusk now and the wind was stronger and colder than ever. They crouched down in the heather at the edge of the trees and watched to see if any sign of life came from the house. But there was no sight nor sound of any living thing.

"There's only one way to do this job, I reckon," said Tom, "and that's to crawl, one by one, through the heather on the right of the path and get down into that big ditch that runs by the walls... If we can crawl along the ditch to where the track sort of stops it going any further - as if it was a bridge, you know - then maybe we could hide there."

"How shall we spread the glass without being seen through that little spyhole?" David asked. "And do you think one of us ought to wait in the wood?"

"We'll take the bottles down with us and smash 'em up in the ditch and then throw the bits up out of the ditch on to the track and hope for the best... Maybe one of you two ought to wait in the wood. Better decide among yourselves. I'm going to start crawling down now, and we must be careful not to be seen... Cheerio!" And with that Tom left them looking blankly at each other.

"Well," Jon said, "that's that! I didn't know Tom decided things for himself in this club."

"Neither did I," David agreed. "He's never been quite like that before. He didn't seem very keen on the adventure when we started, but now he's quite excited."

"Listen, David," said Jon, "I still think it's a good idea for one of us to stay up here. Whoever stays may have the chance to come down on the back of the lorry as it comes under the trees; and, anyway, suppose you two manage to get inside those gates and don't appear again - there ought to be someone outside to go for help."

David looked serious. "I hadn't thought of it that way. This is a crazy idea, you know, Jon, and we must remember the time so as to be getting back to meet the girls. I'd forgotten all about them."

"So had I," Jon agreed, "but we've got to go through with this now. It's too good a scheme to miss. Now let's toss for who goes with Tom."

David won.

"If a lorry or car hasn't come in half an hour," he said, "we'll come back here and make for Clun and try the same trick another day. Do you agree?"

Jon nodded. "I suppose so, but I wish we could stay here all night and see what really is going on round here. Anyway, good luck, David, and just restrain Tom a bit if you can! He's an amazing chap when he gets excited. If I can't get on the back of the lorry I'll watch from here and see what you do, and then if you don't come out soon I'll go back and tell the others and warn Denton as well. I'd better do that, hadn't I?"

"I suppose so. Nobody can say what will happen if we do get in but let's have a shot, Jon. If you're on the back of the lorry as it comes down, drop off just where the big ditch ends by the track. That's where we'll be hiding and we'll throw the broken glass as far up the track as we can

... Cheerio, Jon. Hope we don't have to wait too long," and he dodged through the trees and then crawled through the heather after Tom.

It took him longer to reach the ditch than he had expected and the journey was very unpleasant for he dared not raise his head too often to see where he was going. The hill sloped down steeply to the house and if a watcher was hidden behind the peephole in the closed doors he could easily have seen anyone approaching in the normal way. David had to stop several times to rest and take his bearings, but he rolled over the edge of the ditch without knowing that he had reached it. He got to his feet cautiously and looked round. The light was going fast now and with a shock he realized that he did not know which way to turn to find Tom. He was just making up his mind to climb the side of the ditch and look round him when he heard the peewit's whistle from his left. Thankfully he answered, and in two minutes found Tom, who was crouching under a hawthorn bush which was growing within a few feet of the top of the bank.

"So it's you, is it?" he grinned. "Don't talk loud because we're at the end of the ditch here and the gates are only a few yards away... Can't you see them? And the wall? Where's Jon?"

David answered the last question first.

"In the wood. If a lorry or anything comes through he's going to try and hop on the back... If nothing comes in half an hour I told him we'd go back to him and try again to-morrow. Have you heard anything?"

"Not a sound. It's the rummest place I've ever struck."

"Have you done the broken glass, Tom?"

"I've busted it up very quietly and cut my hand, but now you're here and it's nearly dark I'll crawl up through the heather and spread it about by hand. It

would be grim if we didn't throw it in the right places... I don't think we could be seen now, do you?"

David shook his head.

"All right, Tom. It's worth risking I think but I'm worried about those girls. We ought to be in Clun now, you know, and they'll be waiting for us."

"It's hard luck for them, David, but they'll understand, I'm sure. Have you thought what we're going to do when we do get into this place?"

"Have a look round and then ask them to open the doors so that we can walk out," David laughed. "Go and do your stuff with the broken glass if you're going and if you lose your way back whistle the call. Buck up!"

Twice, while David was waiting, he thought he heard an unusual sound. The first was undoubtedly the clink of glass on stone, and the second was a rustling which might have been made by someone moving about in the ditch. He wondered if it was Tom and whistled softly but the answering call, when it did come, was from above his head and to the right. Before he could signal again Tom rolled over the edge and clutched at the heather to check his fall.

"I've chucked the broken glass up the track all right. I bet that will do the trick... I say, David, as I was crawling back I could have sworn I saw something or somebody moving about along there just below the top of the bank... I'm going to have a scout round... You stay here, David, in case the van comes..." and he slid down the bank and slipped off into the shadows of the ditch.

David began to think that this adventure belonged entirely to Tom, for he had never known his friend to be so enterprising and excited.

Then he heard the throbbing of a heavy car or lorry in the distance, and at the same time Jon whistled the peewit call which he answered as loudly as he could. Next he saw twin headlights between the trees and the shadowy shape of a large van lurching down the track towards him. Wishing that Tom had not dashed off like that and hoping that he would have the sense to

come back, David crawled forward a little nearer to the track and remained hidden behind a stunted hawthorn tree. As the lorry came nearer the headlights were switched off, and a spotlight low down by the left-hand front wheel suddenly sent a long clear beam along the rough track. David almost cried out with exasperation for, even he could see the pieces of broken glass glinting in the strong light. Then he heard a shout and the headlights went on again.

The lorry swerved violently but too late for there was a loud report as one of the tyres burst. Again the van slewed across the track, righted itself a few yards from David, and stopped with the engine still running. A man got out on the far side and walked round into the glare of the headlights. He was a very unpleasant-looking man, and it was at once obvious that he was in an ugly mood.

"Glass all over the road," he bellowed. "Spread every where and the tyre is flat. Come and see for yourself."

More growling and swearing followed, and the driver got out as well, and the two of them began to kick the broken glass out of the way. This was David's chance, for he knew that while they were in the glare of the lights looking at the ground the two men would not be likely to see him if he moved.

It could not have taken him more than five seconds to dart, doubled low, across the heather to the back of the van, but it seemed like five minutes. At the edge of the track he stumbled and would have fallen flat on his face but for a strong hand that reached out and helped him up.

"Nice work, David," Jon breathed in his ear. "Where's Tom? He certainly worked the glass trick all right."

"Don't know where he is. He dashed off because he thought he saw someone moving about in the ditch... Shall we chance going in on the back of this, Jon?"

"Listen," Jon whispered.

Jon and David held their breath in suspense as the driver growled to his mate, "Cut down and get the gates open. We can't change the wheel here and I'm not going to try either. Let the others take a turn at some of the dirty work, I'm going to drive in as we are."

The boys felt the van shift as the man climbed again into the driving seat and both boys sighed with relief. Under cover of the engine's roar Jon said, "There's a tailboard thing down here. I think it's safe enough because I came down the hill on it. Hop on, David. You'll have to hang on to that steel bar that locks the double doors. I tried to get into the van but couldn't move that bar... Look out! We're moving!"

David jumped up beside Jon as the van lurched forward.

"I can smell sheep," David whispered as they tried to flatten themselves against the closed doors.

"None in there now, I'm sure," Jon gasped as they were nearly flung off the tailboard. "We should hear them. I reckon the van's empty... We've stopped again. Are we through the gates? Be ready to hop off."

"We're not in yet... Hold me on and I'll look round the corner... The gates are still shut but I can see that chap tugging the bell we tried. I s'pose they've got a code signal... I say, Jon! We've got to get inside this van somehow else we're sure to be caught. Let's try this bar again... Ready?"

As they pushed together with all their strength the van moved forward again and the extra jolt moved the bar a little so that as Jon pushed upwards he was able to free it in the socket. David struggled to pull one side of the great door open and as the van bumped slowly through the now open gates the two boys scrambled in and pulled the doors close behind them.

"Hang on to it? Jon," David grunted. "Don't let it swing open."

"We've done it, David! We're in! Bit of luck for us that the bar shifted, else they'd have got us by now."

Then the lorry stopped and the engine was cut off. In the sudden silence they heard the rumble of men's voices from outside and one of them seemed to be apologizing.

"Sorry, guv'nor, if we're a bit behind, but a tyre went on the hill outside. Gippos been chucking glass about. Someone will have to change the wheel."

Then the voices moved away.

"What do we do now?" David whispered.

"Wait a minute or two," Jon said as he rubbed his arm, but even as he spoke there came a new sound - the deep, resonant and angry bark of a great dog. They heard a man shout and then the barking came nearer and almost before they had time to press the door into place the dog, in a frenzy of rage and excitement, began to jump up at the back and hurl himself at the doors, on the other side of which both boys felt themselves go cold with terror.

11. Tom on His Own

When Tom left David so suddenly and ran off down the great ditch after a shadow, he acted for once without thinking first. This was not like Tom for although he was quick-witted he was, by instinct, cautious and liked to make up his mind before taking action.

But somehow this adventure at Clun had changed Tom, and this may have been because it was a real holiday for him. For almost the first time since he had joined the Lone Piners he was acting entirely on his own, and he enjoyed that too as he trotted cautiously along the narrow track at the foot of the great bank.

The light was failing fast now and he remembered that the girls and the twins would be waiting for them at H.Q., by the ruins of the castle. Suddenly he stopped. Ahead of him, in the dusky shadows, he saw a point of light which was not the beam of a torch but a little orange star, that flickered for a second or two and then disappeared. He waited, and then the light came again and he guessed that the man in front of him had stopped to light a pipe or cigarette. Tom crept forward and after a few more steps he was rewarded with the unmistakable smell of tobacco. He was so excited now that he quite forgot David and Jon and hurried forward until he was able to distinguish the figure of the man in front of him. He waited a few seconds while his quarry lit another match, and then hurried forward again. After a little, he heard the unmistakable sound of bleating sheep. For a moment he thought he must be dreaming, but as he stood stock-still and listened the sound came again and he knew that whatever the others were doing at this minute he would not change places with any of them.

He stood waiting and listening as the moon came up over the top of the dyke. Tom never forgot this moment and the way in which the silent, silvery light slid down the side of the great bank on his left and picked out for him a strange scene, the sight of which sent him flat on his face in the heather.

He was hiding at a turn in the track and when he raised his head cautiously he saw that round the bend the ditch itself appeared narrower, with steeper sides. About forty yards ahead of him was a patch of ground bare of heather, and beyond that it seemed as if the ditch was either filled or else turned so sharply that it was not possible to see beyond this particular point. The moonlight had already reached this miniature arena and Tom saw quite clearly a man with a pipe in his mouth, a stick in his hand and a cap on his head. A restless dog at the man's heels barked sharply as the bleating of invisible sheep increased.

Tom, of course, had no idea that the twins had already discovered this hiding-place from the other side, so he was astonished when he saw the man lean forward and throw to one side a hurdle which he afterwards knew to be camouflaged with dead bracken and gorse. The dog barked again as the man spoke to it, and suddenly the ditch seemed full of sheep as they came tumbling, in a panic, out of their shelter.

Tom had to think quickly, for he realized at once that the only direction in which the sheep could be driven was along the ditch towards him. It would perhaps be possible for him to scramble up to the top of the bank and hide until he could see which way the flock would be driven and then follow it. But the sheep were now coming towards him so fast, and the dog was barking and the man cursing, so that the only course open to him seemed to be retreat. He wriggled backwards out of the heather in which he had been lying until he was round the bend and then got to his feet and ran as fast as he could back the way he had come.

As he ran he guessed the secret of the cunning sheep-thieves, for although he did not know how the sheep reached the hiding-place he realized now that large flocks could be driven right along the bottom of the ditch out of sight of any inquisitive strangers or even of the farmers themselves, right up to the gates of Grey Walls. What happened then Tom had no idea, but he was now determined to find out.

Tired, footsore and breathless, he dashed on along the narrow track and after a few minutes he looked up to his right and saw the grim walls of the house above him. He stopped and whistled the peewit call, but there was no answer.

Then he heard the sheep behind him and he began to climb frantically up the bank to the hawthorn tree where David and he had hidden half an hour ago.

Once up he could see at once that the gates were still closed and that there was no sign either of a van or of David or Jon. For a moment he wondered if David had been forced to change his hiding-place. He raised his head and whistled the peewit's call three times. The third time he thought he heard an answering call, but it was very faint and far away.

Tom was puzzled now and rather worried. It was possible that Jon, if he was still at his post in the spinney, had heard him and answered; but the signal he had caught - if it was not imagination - had not seemed to come from that direction. Then he had no more time for wondering what had happened to the others, for he looked down and saw that the man was now in front of the flock.

He knew that he was in a most dangerous position, for if the sheep were to go in through the gates they would have to be driven up the side of the bank. There was no chance for him to move, for if he attempted to do so surely either the man or the dog would see him? In despair he tried to wriggle still lower into the heather and wondered, if his luck held, how he would be able to follow the flock into Grey Walls when the gates were opened.

But now came the greatest surprise of all. He could hear the man below him cursing the sheep and his dog, and the sound of his stick as he struck some of the frightened and bewildered animals. Then, when he plucked up his courage to raise his head again, he saw the man bending down over something at ground level on the far side of the ditch. Although this side of the dyke was in shadow, it seemed to him that the man lifted something and then stood to one side. Tom strained his eyes, but could see nothing more than a darker patch of shadow which might perhaps be a rectangular hole in the bank.

It was a hole in the bank! He almost yelled in excitement as the dog barked again from further down the track, the man shouted and used his stick and the sheep began to vanish, one by one, into the cavity.

This then, was the secret of Grey Walls!

Tom peered down into the shadows and was just able to distinguish the form of the stranger as he got into the hole backwards and pulled the cover across the entrance again from the inside.

He lay still and listened. From the other side of the wall came the slightly muffled sound of the bleating sheep and the sharp, excited bark of the dog. There was just a chance, Tom thought, that the shepherd had not followed his flock and might still be in the ditch, so he waited for a few minutes before sliding down the bank. He was too excited now to remember David or Jon or any of the others! This was a thousand times better than any film which he had ever seen, and he was determined to make the most of it and this wonderful chance to get inside Grey Walls.

The bottom of the ditch was still in deep shadow, but his eyes soon became accustomed to the dark and after a little searching he found a heavy hurdle leaning against the side of the bank. He crouched down and put his ear against the rough bracken with which it was disguised, but could only hear the plaintive, monotonous call of the sheep. Very, very gently he pulled the hurdle across until there was a gap large enough for him to squeeze through. His head hit the roof, so he went down on his hands and knees and crawled forward.

The sound of the sheep was much clearer now, and suddenly he heard a man's voice only a few yards away calling directions to the dog, and guessed that the sheep were now being driven into pens. After what seemed a very long time he heard the man whistle to the dog, and then footsteps which died away in the distance.

He crawled forward cautiously. The tunnel sloped down for a few yards, turned a little and then ran uphill. As he crawled up he sniffed the fresh, cold air again and noticed with surprise that some windows on the ground floor of the big house were lit up. This was the first sign of life in the house behind the grey walls seen by any of the Lone Piners.

Tom put his head out into the open and looked round cautiously. Although the house itself was in shadow, the ground in front of it was bathed in

moonlight. He glanced first to his right and saw at once that his guess had been correct: the stolen sheep were crowded together in a pen. When he had given a quick look in the other direction he shot back into his tunnel like a startled rabbit, for, not more than fifty yards away, standing on a rough drive, was a large furniture van. Two men were wrestling with a wheel, and when he turned again and there was a lull in the bleating of the sheep, Tom could hear the mutter of their grumbling voices.

Unless the van had been there all the time, which did not seem very likely, it must have arrived while he was following the shepherd down the ditch! It was just then that Tom began to wonder what had happened to the other two and whether he had really been a little too clever. Perhaps it would be better to creep back down the tunnel and find David and Jon? After all, he was the first to get inside the grey walls - at least he thought he was - and he had seen the stolen sheep, the furniture van, the driver and his mate and the lights in the windows. Surely he had enough evidence now for a policeman?

And yet Tom hesitated. He hated going back without getting nearer to the house. It would only take a few minutes, and he might be able to dodge across the patch of moonlight when the driver and his mate went to the other side of the van. It was true that he ran a big risk of being seen from one of the windows, but his luck had held so far and was hardly likely to break now.

Then his mind was made up for him.

Somewhere at the side of the house a door opened. A man stepped out, put his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Come on in, you two... Boss wants you right away... Buck up!"

The two men dropped what they were doing and strolled over towards the open back door, and Tom, on sudden impulse, left the shelter of the tunnel and started for the van. Somehow he felt an impulse to examine this first, and with the guards called off this was his big chance.

But suddenly his scalp tickled with terror as the silence was broken by the deep baying of a great dog. He looked back over his shoulder and saw an

enormous animal like a wolf bounding across the moonlit patch towards him.

"What a fool I've been!" poor Tom panted as he tried to spurt. The only thing he could possibly do now was to jump for the van and hope that the back would be open.

."But it *must* be open," he prayed.

The dog was gaining on him fast, and he thought he heard men's voices shouting as well as he made a last great effort and scrambled up the tailboard of the van. At first glance it looked as if the big double doors were closed, but suddenly one of them pushed outwards a little and a strong hand grabbed him and pulled him in. Before he could cry out he was flung on the floor of the van and another hand was put over his mouth. The door closed with a bang as the great dog, snapping and snarling, hurled himself against it.

Tom began to struggle. A man shouted outside, and then another voice that he knew breathed in his ear:

"Gosh, Jon - it's Tom!... But we're for it now, for they've heard the dog. Here they all come... Lie flat on the floor and let's hope for the best!"

12. The Girls to the Rescue

High on the hill above Clun, Penny, Peter, Jenny and the twins crouched in the sheltered corner of H.Q.3.

"It's no use staying here, I tell you," Jenny was saying. "We'll all die of the cold if we're here much longer, and there's no sense in it. Let's go home now and get something to eat and tell Agnes not to worry... Of course, something dreadful may have happened to them, but I don't think it could really, because Tom's with them."

Penny opened her mouth at this last remark and Peter's chin went up indignantly, but before either could say what they were thinking Jenny went on as breathlessly as usual.

"... And another thing... Why won't you twins tell us what you know? You say you've found out everything, so why don't you tell us? It's just silly staying here."

"I think so, too," Penny said. "I think maybe the boys are playing a trick on us. Or else they've forgotten all about us..."

Peter flushed with anger.

"I don't know how you *dare* to say such a thing, Penny. It's the meanest thing I've ever heard you say, and it just shows you're the newest member of this Club... Of course they'd be here if they possibly could. Something's gone wrong, and I think they're in great trouble."

Before anyone could answer this outburst she reached across and pulled Dickie to his feet by his collar.

"No more nonsense now, twins," she went on. "This is serious. Tell us what you know."

For a moment they looked mutinous.

Then "All right, Peter," Mary said quietly, "we'll tell."

Between them they told their story in less time than usual, for they realized that Peter was very serious.

"... And so, you see," Mary finished triumphantly, "Mr Cantor is the most wonderful detective. Now I think we'd better do as Jenny says and go home and look for him... He'll find the boys for us."

"I agree, Mary," Peter smiled. "Something has gone wrong and I think that we'd better get back now. When we find Mr Cantor, I s'pose we ought to tell him that the boys were going over to Grey Walls. What d'you think?"

"Maybe we should," Penny agreed. "I don't know Agnes very well, but somehow I don't think it would be a good idea to let her know what we're up to."

"Right, let's go!" decided Peter. "It's agreed that we tell Mr Cantor privately but try to keep it from Agnes."

The twins were unusually quiet as they trudged along the street to Keep View, and Peter felt very unhappy. She and Jenny were walking in front and they waited on the steps of the house for the others when they came up.

"Look here, twins," she said, "you go right away and see if you can find your friend Mr Cantor. If he's downstairs just get him in a corner and ask him if we can all come and talk to him privately. If he's not about, go and knock at the door of his room. We'll try and deal with Agnes."

"All right, Peter," Dickie said quietly. "We'll try."

The twins went into the lounge at once, but Penny walked briskly up the hall and knocked loudly on the kitchen door.

"Here we are, Agnes dear," she called cheerfully. "Back at last and safe and sound!"

The door opened and Agnes stood before them. Her face was pale and anxious but her mouth was set in a hard line as she looked them up and

down.

"There's but three of you," she said quietly. "Where are those little ones?"

Peter gulped. "They're all right, Agnes; they're here. They've just gone upstairs to wash."

Agnes relaxed a little. "And those boys?" she said suddenly.

Penny tried this time.

"We're very, very sorry, Agnes dear. I know we're wrong and it's all my fault. I'm responsible and I really know it was rude and thoughtless of us to be so late. We've been out exploring and didn't know exactly what the time was... Please forgive us?"

"Where are those boys?" the housekeeper repeated.

"I don't think they'll be long," Penny said, a little too brightly. "We haven't been with them for some time but we know they'll soon turn up... Don't worry about our supper, please Agnes... I mean, we'll get it and clear it away afterwards."

Before Agnes could reply the door opened and the twins entered. They were quick to sense the atmosphere, and while Mary rushed over to Agnes and flung her arms round her, Dickie looked soberly at Peter and shook his head.

"It's so lovely to be back, Agnes darling," Mary said. "Please don't be too cross with us. We've had the loveliest adventures and now we're cold and hungry - only just now I said to Dickie that the best thing about going out and having fun is coming back home and being looked after by Agnes. Didn't I, twin?"

"Yes, you did!... Did you happen to notice when Mr Cantor went out, Agnes?"

The housekeeper never could resist the twins.

"Ah well," she said, "I know there's not one of you means any harm but you mustn't worry me like this. Now be sitting down as quick as you can and enjoy some nice hot soup... Mr Cantor, did you say, Dickie?... He dashed out in a great hurry about an hour gone, shouting to me from the front doorstep that he didn't know when he would be back. I must say I've been having a very upsetting evening."

The hot supper was very welcome but Peter nearly choked once when she looked at the three empty places and then noticed Penny doing the same. It was so utterly unlike David not to turn up when he had promised that she was now really frightened.

But there was no chance to talk her worries over for Agnes came in and shut the door firmly behind her.

"Now I'm having no more nonsense," she began, "unless those boys are in this house by nine o'clock - and that's just under the hour - I'm going to the police station and you're all coming with me. This is beyond a joke for me, I can tell you, and I should, by rights, be ringing up your parents this very minute."

"They'll be here any minute now, I'm sure," Peter pleaded. "I'm sure they will, Agnes," but she said it as much to convince herself as the housekeeper.

When the door closed again Penny said, "She's crying, Peter - Did you notice? This is grim, isn't it?"

They were too tired and too frightened to say much now and sat quietly and miserably round the fire waiting. The twins sat side by side on the floor looking into the flames with Mary leaning against Jenny's knees. Once or twice the little girl's head nodded and Peter, watching her, felt that lovely feeling of warmth and sleep creeping over her as well. Only Penny, her chin on her hands and her elbows on her knees, seemed really wide awake. Suddenly she made up her mind and wondered why she had been sitting for so long doing nothing, but as she jumped to her feet the door opened and Agnes came in again.

"Now," she began, "if you know where these boys are you'd better say for I'm off right this minute to the police."

Peter got up and stood beside Penny.

"We think we know where they might be, Agnes, but we've got something to tell you... The twins have been out with Mr Cantor, as you know, and they've found out he's a detective."

Agnes raised her hands in horror.

"I never heard the like..." she began.

"It's true, Agnes. Honest it is," Dickie interrupted, "We'll come with you to the police station. I promise you that Mr Cantor is the chief policeman. He'll find the boys for us. Don't you worry! Mary and me will take care of you."

The housekeeper had already turned to the door when she realized that Peter had admitted that they knew where the boys might be, but before she could speak Penny said:

"You go on with the twins, Agnes, and see if Mr Cantor is there. We'll come along in a few minutes... Yes, of course we will, but we've got to get our coats and things."

The twins sensed that the others wanted to get rid of Agnes and led her out, looking very bewildered and unhappy, into the hall. As soon as the front door closed Penny whirled on the others.

"Listen, Peter," she said, "I know what we must do and it's the only thing we can do. I'm not going down to the police station for anybody and I don't care if Mr Cantor is the Lord-High-Detective of all England!... Here we have been sitting mugging round the fire waiting for the boys, and then for Agnes to do something. Why don't we do something? Let's go out now on our own. Let's go to Grey Walls and explore that and see if we can see any sign of them. Maybe they're wanting us..."

"But, Penny," Jenny began.

"There aren't any buts," Penny stormed. "Can't you see that's what we ought to have done just as soon as we found that Mr Cantor wasn't here...? Are you game, Peter? Are you, Jenny?"

"Yes, I am," Peter said shortly. "Of course you're right, Penny... Coming, Jenny?"

"You're both so quick," Jenny wailed. "But of course I'll come. I'd rather do anything than stay here thinking."

They were all out of the house in four minutes, tying scarves and pulling zips as they ran down the steps, and did not pause for breath until they reached the signpost at the crossroads.

"While we were coming along I was thinking again," Jenny began. "I do hope you won't reckon I'm silly, but don't you believe it would be more sensible to go to Bury Fields and tell the Dentons what's happened?"

"No, I don't," Penny almost snapped. "Why, Jenny? Are you scared?"

"I don't think I am any more," Jenny said quietly as

Peter looked at her in surprise. "I was at first and I generally am to begin with, but I'm sure I'm not now."

Penny looked ashamed. "Sorry, Jen," she said, "but I can't see any sense in going to the Dentons because I'm sure the boys won't be there."

"I don't suppose they will," Jenny agreed, "but what I mean is that Alan could come with us and help us to find the boys, or maybe he could get together a search party or something. Do you see what I mean?"

Penny shook her head, but Peter looked doubtful.

"I mean that if we all go to Grey Walls now and find out something there's not much us three girls can do about it, is there?"

"Why not? If the boys can do it we can," Penny said.

"I don't know about that... I know there's lots of things that Tom does that I couldn't, but don't you see that if something extra special has to be done in a hurry, Alan, or some of his friends, are sure to be able to do more than we can do anyway," Jenny replied.

"You can do what you like, of course," Penny said, "but I'm going to Grey Walls right now... Back in the summer Jon and David rescued me and the twins and if they can do it for me I don't see why three girls - or two girls, anyway - can't do the same for them... You do what you like, Jenny, but I'm going after the boys. Are you coming with me, Peter, or are you going with Jenny?"

Even while Penny had been speaking Peter had been fairly confident that Jenny's suggestion had been wise. And although she did not hesitate to answer Penny now she still believed that Jenny was right. But if Penny thought that she had a duty to rescue Jon, surely the vice-captain of the Club had a greater duty to rescue the Captain?

"Of course I'm coming with you, Penny, and you'll come with us too, won't you, Jen? Your idea isn't bad, but we can't desert the boys - surely you see that?"

In the moonlight Jenny's chin went up in a way which Peter had never noticed before.

"I'm not going to desert the boys," she said stubbornly, "but if you're right and they've been caught by whoever lives in Grey Walls, then they've got to be rescued and I don't think we can rescue them as quickly as Alan Denton and his friends can... Besides, there's another thing. I'm sure that Alan ought to be told about Mr Cantor and that the boys haven't come back... I don't care what either of you say but I'm absolutely sure I'm right. I'm going to Bury Fields... I'm not a bit afraid of going on my own... I'll find Alan and we'll come over to that little wood above the house and look for you there... Cheerio!"

Peter felt a lump rise in her throat at the sight of the little figure trudging along so bravely by herself. This self-reliant, confident and courageous Jenny was someone Peter had never met before.

"Jenny!" she called suddenly. "Wait a sec. I've got something for you."

"It's no use, Peter," Jenny said. "I'm going to Bury Fields. I've made up my mind that one of us ought to go and if you and Penny want to go to Grey Walls I don't blame you... Honest I don't, Peter!... But don't make me change my mind, Peter, please."

When Jenny looked up Peter saw that tears were glistening on her friend's cheeks although her voice was steady enough - steadier than her own when she said, "That's all right, Jenny. I understand. And you know why I feel I've got to go with Penny, don't you?"

Jenny nodded. "Oh yes, I do. You won't let her rescue Jon if you don't rescue David, will you? I feel like that about Tom, but I'm going to do it a different way... What are you doing, Peter?"

Peter was fumbling under a scarf, an anorak and her red sweater.

"Take this, Jenny, will you? It's a whistle the gipsies, Reuben and Miranda, gave me once. They told me that if ever I was in trouble and blew it and the Romanies were near enough to hear that they would come to my help. I'll lend it to you, Jenny because there's only one of you and two of us!... Good luck, Jenny! Up the Lone Piners!"

As she ran back to the gate Peter smiled at the thought of the look on Jenny's face and at the way in which she had stepped off briskly down the road whistling cheerfully.

Penny looked at her curiously as they climbed over the gate.

"That was brave of Jenny, wasn't it? I like her, Peter... I like you all... Do you know the way?"

"I believe I can remember..."

Although the moon was high in the sky, big clouds were now piling up from the north and it was darker than it had been when they were waiting at H.Q.3 some hours ago. Twice they missed the track and once went half-a-

mile out of their way after two trees on the skyline that were nothing to do with the spinney for which they were searching.

At last Penny pointed ahead.

"Look, Peter. Surely that's the spinney just down in that dip? And can you see something else? Two little squares of yellow. Do you know what those are?"

"Yes, I do. They're lighted windows in the house, but it's funny we can see them from here and never seemed able to see the house in daylight."

Penny started to move off again towards the pine trees and, for a moment did not realize that her friend was not with her.

Meanwhile Peter stood still looking down on the two lighted windows and feeling vaguely uneasy. She was aware that Penny, twenty paces ahead, had turned and was waiting for her but for a moment she felt that she could not move. She brushed a hand across her eyes and then, with a great effort, broke the strange spell and hurried on down the path.

"What were you doing, Peter? Dreaming?"

"Think I must have been," Peter said. "I wonder if we shall be able to watch those windows all the time... That's rum, Penny. They've disappeared now. You know you can only see down on to the house from certain places... There they are again. They must be windows of rooms right at the top of the house... Let's wait a sec. under the trees and shelter from this wind. I can't feel my feet... And keep your eye on those windows."

They leant against the trunk of a great fir tree while above them the branches tossed and threshed and moaned.

"I *loathe* wind," Penny said suddenly. "I think I can stand any weather but wind... Peter! One of those lights has gone out... No, it hasn't. It's on again... Peter, look! They've gone mad... It keeps going on and off. Can you see it, too?"

Peter suddenly shouted in excitement.

"Penny! Watch! Somebody is signalling... That's Morse. Do you know it?"

Penny shook her head gloomily.

Peter was murmuring to herself, "Dash. Dot? That's N... Now what? Nothing else. Just an N. Maybe he'll start again... Here he comes again, Penny! Now I can do it. Just remember the letters as I spell them out. Dot, dash, dash, dash - that's J... Now three dashes, and that's O, and then dash dot again. Doesn't make sense to me. Suppose that's part of a word."

"Of course it is, you chump!" Penny shouted. "Can't you see we've found them? That message is J-O-N, which is short for Jonathan... We've found them, Peter. All we've got to do is to get into the house somehow and rescue them... Peter! PETER! What's wrong, Peter? What is it?"

Peter was still leaning back against the trunk of a tree with her hands over her eyes and did not answer.

"Peter! What's wrong?"

Slowly Peter lowered her hands and Penny hated the dazed look on her face. She looked straight ahead, as if she was hypnotized, at the two rectangles of light below them and said in a strained voice:

"Don't go, Penny. Stay here with me a sec. I am scared, Penny... I've been here before."

"Don't be an ass, Peter," Penny said uneasily. "Of course you have. You know you have."

"I mean this has all happened to me before. I know it has. I remember the trees and the wind and the cold, and I remember you, though I don't remember the lighted windows... Penny, I've been here before at this very time... I remember now, Penny... There ought to be a fire! *Look behind you, Penny!* Is the heather on fire?"

Penny turned at the note of urgency in her voice and then felt her scalp tingle with fear as she saw a belt of red and orange flames and billowing smoke sweeping down towards them from the top of the hill.

Peter was still too bewildered by her strange experience to move, and Penny tugged at her sleeve.

"Peter! We can't stay here... The flames are coming straight at us... Come on, Peter... We must get down to the house, and they'll have to let us in."

"I remember it all," Peter said quietly. "I didn't know who you were, Penny - not then, I didn't."

"What do you mean, Peter - *not then*?"

"Oh, I don't know, really, except that this has happened to me before... Sorry, Penny. I sound crazy, I know, but don't look so worried. There's nothing the matter with me, really... Let's show those boys what we can do," and side by side they ran down the rough track towards the great double gates.

When at last they reached the flat space in front of the gates the girls turned at the same time to see whether the fire was gaining. From that moment everything happened so quickly that it was not until long after that they pieced the order of events together. But neither of them ever forgot that astonishing scene as they stood alone with the closed gates of the house at their backs and the great fire roaring down towards them.

The skyline was alight for as far as they could see to the left, and right up to the spinney above them. Even as they watched another tree flared up and the sky was blotted out by the billowing clouds of smoke. And all the while the wind that Penny hated blew harder. It roared down at them steadily and relentlessly and fanned the flames crackling through the dry and brittle undergrowth.

"It will burn itself out when it gets down here," Peter whispered almost to herself. "It can't spread over this grass. But we'd better get down in the ditch, Penny."

"Sparks are blowing down the ditch now, Peter. There's plenty of gorse and stuff to catch fire down there, isn't there?... LOOK, Peter! LOOK! I can see HORSES!"

And then, as if to complete the fantastic picture of a moorland fire, in the middle of a cold winter's night they saw some six or eight horsemen come galloping through the flames and smoke straight towards them down the hill.

Peter wondered if she was dreaming again, and then suddenly she recognized the riders.

"It's Reuben, the gipsy," she shouted as she grabbed Penny's arm. "I don't see how it could be, but it is... and that's our Jenny behind him! Hi, Reuben!"

Then they found themselves scrambling down the sides of the ditch as the horsemen shouted at them. Reuben smiled as he soothed his horse and Jenny, with shining eyes, flung herself between them.

"The whistle worked, Peter. See how it worked! And Alan is about somewhere. We found him almost at once... I told him about Cantor and the boys and he said he'd help. Have you found anything?"

The ditch seemed full of plunging horses and shouting, swearing men who had no time for anything but care of the terrified animals. In the distance Peter saw Alan struggling with his hunter. The sky seemed full of flying sparks and burning twigs, and although some of them fell nearby no fresh fires were started, probably because in the dyke they were sheltered from the wind, but there was so much noise that the girls had to shout to each other to be heard.

"Have you found anything else?" Jenny shouted above the clamour. "Do you know that they're here? I told Reuben and Alan that they were. I hope I was right!"

"You are," Penny shouted in her ear. "Jon has been signalling to us from inside and we got the message... I wish the horses weren't so scared, and

then we could talk to these men you've brought, Jenny. You said you were going to get help, and you've certainly done it."

When they turned round Peter was shouting at Reuben, who was still holding his horse. Penny, in exasperation that they were not doing something more spectacular, skipped back out of the way of the horses' restless feet and felt something move against her back.

"But *do* something, Reuben," Peter was yelling. "I'll hold your pony... Go over and get hold of Mr Denton... Tell him we know the boys are inside there and that we're sure they're prisoners."

"In just a little minute..." the gipsy began, and then Penny pulled at Peter's sleeve and dragged her away.

"Look what I've found. It's a way in under the walls. Come on, Peter and Jenny! Crawl in behind me and we'll be the first in after all..."

They crawled along the tunnel and as they came out the other side two men were running across from the house towards the gates. The girls shrank back into the shadows and looked up to see if they could find the lighted window from which Jon had signalled.

"I don't know where we are," Penny cried. "It looks different from inside. Which window was it, Peter?"

While she was speaking there came the sound of breaking glass from their right and the tinkle of the fragments as they broke on the ground beneath.

"Over there," Peter called. "Come on. This way. Don't worry about those men, anyway. They're busy with the gates, I think... There are the boys! Look! We're here, David."

She stopped and pointed to a window that had been just out of sight when they came up from the tunnel. In the moonlight and the red glow of the fire they recognized Tom leaning out of the broken window beside David. Tom had his hand to his mouth and was shouting something.

"Can't hear you!" Jenny called.

"LOOK OUT FOR THE DOG!" David yelled. "LOOK OUT!... RUN!"

They heard that shout above the din outside and the bleating of the sheep nearby, and as they turned they heard above everything the furious bark of the Alsatian that came bounding towards them. Instinctively they began to run, for even Penny was frightened when she saw the great dog's eyes shining in the dark, and the white gleam of his teeth. And while Penny and Jenny ran back towards the tunnel Peter stood her ground and then walked forward confidently to meet the dog.

"It's all right, old boy," she said quietly as she put out her hand. "Here, boy! Come here. Good boy!"

The dog, with lolling tongue, stopped short at the sound of her voice. She spoke to it again gently and held out her hand. The dog sniffed at it, licked it and wagged his tail. Peter put a hand on its head and made a fuss of it, and then slipped her other hand underneath his collar and led him towards her two friends, who were watching wide-eyed.

"He's all right now," Peter said quietly. "He won't touch us, I promise..."

"What about the boys?" Jenny asked; then, "ALL RIGHT, TOM! We're all right!" she yelled up to the broken window. "Peter did something magic. What do you mean? Go over there where you're pointing?"

They turned again to see a big furniture van drive in through the open gates. As they started to run towards it the back opened and six or seven policemen jumped out, followed by a well-known figure in a plus-four suit.

"It's Mr Cantor," Peter shouted as she began to run towards him. "The twins were right and we're all saved now... Look, Penny. They've grabbed those men who ran across to open the gates. Hello, Mr Cantor! I bet you're surprised to see us."

Mr Cantor certainly was! He was so surprised that his mouth fell open before he was able to say anything.

"I s'pose you know that the boys are prisoners in this house?" she went on. "They're in a room right up under the roof, and they've just broken the window. Will you help us with a policeman, please?"

Before he could answer a familiar voice said plaintively, "I haven't heard any shooting, so I reckon we can come out now, Mr Cantor." And Dickie and Mary popped their heads over the back of the van!

13. Explanations

Just before four o'clock the following afternoon Alan Denton strode cheerfully into the big kitchen of Bury Fields.

"It's warmer," he said as he paused on the threshold. "Snow on the way, and I'm glad we'll see the back of that wind... My word, Mother, but that table's a grand sight. Can I start before those kids arrive?"

Mrs Denton smiled a welcome.

"I've done the best I can in the time, son, but I've forgotten how many you said would be coming. If there's not enough room for all, some must sit on the floor, but every plate and cup we've got in the place is out on that table. Now, Alan, tell me about these children again, for I get them a bit muddled in my mind."

"We all owe them a lot, you know, Mother. It's odd that I should have met two of them in the train on the way home the other day and that they should have all turned up here... They're a grand lot, you know," and he glanced out of the window.

"Look, here comes Peter over the hill now on that little nag of hers..."

Three minutes later Peter came in, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed with the cold.

"I do hope I'm not too early," she said. "If I am, perhaps I could help a bit... The others are only about ten minutes behind, but I felt I wanted to come on Sally. And did Alan tell you Agnes is coming, too? Mr Cantor is bringing her in a car, but the others all said they'd rather walk..."

Rather shyly she slipped off her sheepskin coat.

"Can I help, please, Mrs Denton? Isn't it wonderful that they've caught those awful men, and now you won't be worried again about losing your sheep?"

"Seems from what I hear that you youngsters had something to do with the catching of 'em. I reckon we're proud of you round here, but maybe we'll get the full story when this special policeman and the others arrive... Why, girl! You're yawning your head off! You must be tired out."

"It's not so bad now," Peter laughed. "But we've not quite caught up with our sleep yet! We think it's marvellous of you to invite us and we're all thrilled about it, but do please excuse us if we yawn a bit... Look! Here they are. I can see them coming over the top of the hill. I'll run out and meet them."

And as the Lone Piners crowded into the yard the sky was lit up by the headlights of a car which came scrunching down the track. It was Mr Cantor and Agnes and so the whole party moved over to the house where Mrs Denton was waiting at the open door and the great kitchen glowed so warm a welcome that most of them - even the twins - were silent with wonder. Nobody ever knew where she had got so much food in so short a time and this was indeed, as Dickie remarked when he had found his tongue again, the "highest high tea" he had ever seen.

Not until they were all together in the lighted room and the red curtains had been pulled across the window, and Mrs Denton and Agnes had retired together, did the Lone Piners have a real opportunity of looking at Mr Cantor who was standing on the hearth-rug chatting to Alan.

He certainly looked different in a checked sports jacket and brown corduroys, and, although he was still as bald and still wore glasses, he looked younger. He looked up suddenly from lighting his pipe and caught Peter's eyes on him.

He twinkled at her and said, "Well, Peter. Forgiven me?"

Peter's cheeks flamed.

"I don't know quite what you mean," she whispered. "I think you ought to forgive me, for I did think the most awful things about you, and sometimes I was very rude, too."

"No, you weren't, Peter - not really... But I didn't like you hating me, you know... I've enjoyed meeting you youngsters, and I'd like to say now that you're a grand lot and I've enjoyed working with you... Maybe your names will be mentioned in my report."

"Will we get medals?" Dickie said. "Mary and me'll take them if you ask us. I don't mind telling you, Mr Cantor, that I'd like a police medal to take back to school."

When the laughter had subsided, Jenny spoke up.

"Of course, we're all half asleep, but we do want you to tell us *everything*, Mr Cantor. We want all the truth, and we don't want you to hide anything."

Jenny's shadowed eyes were wide in her pale little face, and she did not even smile when the others laughed again. Jenny was always mixing the many dramatic stories which she loved with life itself, but before Mr Cantor could answer the door opened again and Mrs Denton and Agnes returned to lead them over to the loaded table.

In one of the few lulls in the buzz of conversation Dickie was heard to say, "It's funny, and it's nice, but we always seem to finish an adventure with a good feed... Do you remember that mighty feast in H.Q.2 at 'Seven Gates', twin?"

Mary nodded happily and whispered back, "Don't let the others know or let Agnes see, but I can't acksherly stop yawning. Being sleepy is awful when you're so hungry."

At last nobody could eat or drink any more, and even Mrs Denton and Agnes, who had been so busy looking after everybody else, had had something themselves. Agnes, with her flock safe and home again and with the twins by her side, was at peace. Mrs Denton looked down the table at her son, now lighting his pipe, and was content. The Lone Piners had each other and had made some new friends as well, but it was Penny who spoke up and spoke for them all when she said:

"Mr Cantor! Please, we're all waiting to hear what you've got to tell us about this adventure and about the men in 'Grey Walls', and whether you've really caught them all and how long they've been in that house and-"

"Stop!" Mr Cantor smiled. "Go easy, girl. One thing at a time, but I promise I'll tell you all everything I can presently... You've got to remember that there's plenty I don't know... It seems that you all split up last night, which was sensible enough, and it seems that you all got into 'Grey Walls' somehow, but who was first?"

"I think we were," David said. "Jon came down the hill on the back of the van and I joined him when the tyre burst... Of course, Tom was in this, too, but he'd gone off on his own."

"Right," Mr Cantor said. "We'll deal with Tom presently... Will you tell us everything that happened to you two, then, David?"

Between them, Jon and David started their story.

"... It was rather grim lying on the filthy floor of that van in the dark and wondering when we were going to be caught," David was saying, "I don't know how Jon felt, but-"

"Awful!" Jon said. "I don't think I've ever felt so terrified as when we realized we were really inside and the dog started to bark."

"I was coming to that," David went on. "The dog came nearer and nearer, and I'm sure that if he'd got to us we'd have had a bad time. But our luck held because the men were so mad about the burst tyre and the gipsies they thought had done it, that they just didn't or wouldn't believe that the dog meant business and that we - or anyone else - could possibly be inside the van. You go on now, Jon."

"I shan't tell this better than David," he began, "but there is one thing we ought to say now. While the men were muttering and cursing outside we did hear the one who came from the house say that the van wheel would have to be changed as it would be wanted later to take more sheep out. Anyway,

after they had dragged the dog away they started up the engine again and the van limped across to what we knew later was a big garage."

Jon turned to Mr Cantor.

"Are we telling you what you want to know, sir? Stop us if we're not... All right. Good!... I s'pose it took them about half an hour to get the wheel off and mend two punctures. It was clear, however, that the men were scared stiff of someone they called the boss. You'll see that we were in a real mess and there wasn't much we could do, because all this time the van was never left alone. We did manage to force open the big doors a bit so that we could see outside. As soon as the wheel was changed the driver said he'd move the van over on to the drive again, and we guessed he did this because it was nearer the sheep pens - of course, we didn't know - about the sheep pens until we saw them from the back of the van. When the driver made his way back to the house his mate came running across and pointed to the walls about forty yards away from us... The moon was very bright, you'll remember, and we could see all this clearly, but you can guess how excited we were when we saw sheep coming up out of a hole in the ground. There was a sheep dog, too, and the sheep were driven into the pens by the men, and we heard one of them say they wouldn't be able to get away for another two hours.

"Then we were sure our chance was coming, but a lot of things all happened at once that spoiled that. When the men went in to the back door they must have let the dog out, for he started barking again, and at the same time we saw somebody coming out of the hole under the wall. We didn't recognize Tom until we had him in the van because he was out of our line of vision as he ran across, but to say that we were glad it was him is the understatement of the year."

"Too true!" Tom said. "Never been so scared in my life as when that dog was after me."

"Now I think the really interesting part of the story begins," Mr Cantor said, "but tell us as quickly as you can and then I'll ask you any questions after..."

"Well," David went on, "the next part wasn't so pleasant, but I'll tell you as quickly as I can. This time the dog was so furious that the men began to realize that something was wrong, but they were still arguing about it when the man they called the boss came sauntering across the yard.

I was watching through the crack in the doors and saw him. He was smoking a cigar and wearing a light-coloured overcoat. He spoke to the dog and put his hand on its collar, and then he told the men to open the van!"

"We weren't very clever then," David went on apologetically, "but of course there wasn't much we could do."

"What exactly did you do?" Alan asked.

"Well," Jon said after a long silence, "we had a bit of a scrap..."

"Eventually they hauled us off indoors," David continued. "Trouble was that they were just too big for us, but I bet there's one of 'em will remember Tom for quite a long time. Tom's much quicker than I am, you know... Anyway we were taken into a marvellous big room where the smart guy was by himself. He sat on the arm of an enormous sofa and smoked his cigar and drank his drink and looked at us and asked us questions..."

"What did he ask you?" Mr Cantor said quietly.

"He asked us why we had come. If anybody had sent us down to spy on him and of course we said, no, it was just that we were interested in the country, and he didn't like that. Then, quite suddenly, he flung his cigar away and told us that we were going to be locked in an upstairs room until we came to our senses, and before we could argue he called in the toughs and we were marched off. You go on now, Tom."

Tom ran his fingers round the inside of his shirt collar.

"It wasn't much of a room. No carpet or lino and only one small iron bed, a chair, and a bare sort of chest. The chap with a squint and his mate had to fetch another fellow before they could get us up the stairs, but in the end

they shoved us in and locked the door. It was Jon's idea to signal and he did it by moving his coat up and down in front of the light."

"What did you signal, Jon?" Penny asked suddenly.

"Sometimes I did SOS and then our names. It was too difficult to do long words or sentences. It was something to do, although we didn't see how you girls could reach us."

"Oh, didn't you?" Penny protested. "And who did reach you, we'd like to know? You just wait till you hear what we did after waiting for hours and freezing almost to death up at those ghastly ruins."

They calmed her down and Tom continued.

"There's not much more to say, I don't reckon. After Jon had been signalling for a bit we saw the fire come over the top of the hill and then Alan and the rest of them dashing down on the horses. It was better than the television... When all the excitement started outside, and everybody was dashing about we tried to get the door open but couldn't manage it. Then we saw you girls prancing about down there and remembered the dog, so I bashed the window and I reckon that's all."

"Oh you do, do you?" said Dickie, breaking the hush that followed. "You reckon that's all? You've quite forgotten who came and rescued you, I s'pose? You don't know who found a policeman while the flames of that prairie fire were lickin' the very gates and led him right through the enemy's camp till we found you there and busted open the door and rescued you... You reckon that's all, do you?"

Poor Tom was taken aback by this attack and was thankful to Jon who said, "You go too fast, Dickie. I was just going to thank you and Mary publicly, now, in the name of the three of us... Thank you, Richard. Thank you, Mary."

The twins inclined their heads in recognition of this tribute and then begged Mr Cantor to tell his story but he said again that he wanted to hear all that they had to say first.

"Let me tie up the threads at the end," he said.

David yawned behind his hand.

"I want to know how the girls popped up out of that tunnel, and I seem to remember hearing that Jenny had an adventure we know nothing about..."

So Penny began the girls' story...

"And, you see," she finished, "we didn't do much really and it was luck that we found the tunnel under the walls..."

What I want to know is what happened to Jenny and how she came riding down through the fire." Here she leaned forward to speak to Mr Cantor.

"And if there's anyone here who ought to have a medal I think it's Jenny because she's the bravest of any of us. I know I wouldn't have liked to have gone off by myself in the dark."

It seemed that Jenny was much better at reading stories than telling them, but she was persuaded to try.

"I do wish you wouldn't keep on at me so," she began, and then Tom whispered something to her and she took a deep breath and tried again. "I hated it after Peter had left me to go back to Penny. I hated it. It was so cold that I felt a bit sick, and although I'd pretended to be brave I knew I wasn't. Well, anyway, I kept on walking over the hills in the heather looking for this place and after a bit I saw what looked like a little flame. When I got nearer I saw it was a camp fire still burning near a caravan. Then I remembered what Peter had given me and as I was lost and scared and cold and miserable, I took out the little whistle the gipsies gave her and blew it hard. I blew it once or twice as I walked nearer and then the caravan door opened and there was Reuben... I was quite sure it was magic - him being there I mean. I was never so pleased to see anybody at any time as dear Reuben... I told him how I got the whistle and that Peter had lent it to me, and then I told him that I wanted to find Alan because you boys were probably prisoners and p'raps being tortured... Then he said it was quite all right for me to have blown the whistle and I must come up on the piebald horse with him and we'd be at Bury Fields in about five minutes, and so we were. On

the way he told me that because of what David had said he'd come back to Clun just because he wasn't afraid of being accused when he was really innocent.

"I don't know where we went but soon there were four men, and when we got here there were five 'cos Alan was just going out to find someone to ride and keep watch with him.

"And I ought to tell you," Jenny continued, "that twice Alan spoke nicely to Reuben... Mind you I think Alan was a beast about Reuben and Miranda once upon a time, but he was awfully friendly this time... That's about all that happened to me except that all the time we were coming down that hill with the fire behind I was very scared."

At last it was Mr Cantor's turn, and when he had thanked them all for their stories he explained that sheep stealing had been going on in all parts of the country during the long winter nights. It had started very cleverly in a small way and in so many different districts that it was some time before the police realized that the thefts were organized. Always it seemed that the sheep were moved to another part of the country as soon as possible where they would be sold for slaughter in the black market.

"We've got most of 'em now," he said, "and you'll all be glad to know that the ringleader is now behind lock and key. We haven't found out yet how they got Grey Walls, but it was the ideal place for a headquarters. I think most of you realized that for some odd reason the very lie of the country round it makes it invisible from the side we know except from the spinney... By the way, none of you have asked me if the fire is out? Yes - it is. It burned itself out last night when it reached the level ground down by the house, but I'll tell you more about that in a minute.

"The dyke of course was an ideal hiding-place for sheep. It seems the farmers round here do know it, but never seem to take much interest in it, and I don't believe one of them would have thought of searching it. This morning my men found four more hidden pens for stolen sheep in two miles of ditch. I'm not sure why it was considered necessary to make that tunnel under the walls, but maybe it existed before this chap got hold of the house and he had the sense to use it. We think sheep stolen in the day were hidden

in the dyke till dusk and then driven into the pens at Grey Walls in the dark. Sometimes the farmers' marks would be changed or obliterated before they were driven out again in the van... By the way, Peter, they seem to have had only one van operating from here, but we've discovered that they changed its colour and the name of its supposed owner by fitting false sides.

"From here the stolen sheep would go sometimes into Wales but more often into Shrewsbury or Birmingham... Just before you youngsters arrived we'd been suspicious that the thieves were working from somewhere round here, but it's wild and lonely country, and I spent some days in the district on my horrible old bicycle, but I never found Grey Walls until the same day that you did... I don't know whether you realize it but you've all been very helpful indeed. I'm sorry I had to mislead you all at first, but I was suspicious and afraid you might be a nuisance. Then if I'd given you a glimmering of the truth there was a risk - though I know now it wouldn't have been a risk - that you would let something out, and it would get back to Grey Walls that the elderly gent roaming the hills for flint arrowheads was not what he appeared.

"I'm afraid I blamed the gipsies for the same reason. I didn't want to talk about stolen sheep to anyone for a few days, but to find out more in my own way. It was more natural for elderly Mr Cantor to blame gipsies and I didn't want Denton and Clancy to start such a fuss that the thieves would close up activities here and move. I'd been told that I'd got to get hold of the ringleader at all costs, so I didn't want him to slip out of the noose - as Jenny would say, I think - before I was ready for the lot of them. After the twins and Mackie had found the hiding place in the dyke yesterday I got busy."

"I gave him the idea to get inside the gates," Dickie said. "We were inside the van with some marvellous policemen and when we stopped for a council of war up beyond the pine trees I had the idea... Mary or me did anyway... It was one of us... Or maybe we both had it at the same time..."

"What idea?" Tom shouted. "Do get on with it, Dickie."

"It was a good idea," Mary said quietly. "We thought of it... We told Mr Cantor to go out with a box of matches and burn everything up till they all

came scuttlin' out like rats in a trap."

"What Mary says is right enough," said Mr Cantor. "We tried the fire idea and it worked far more quickly than I thought. The men I had with me went out and started about six fires and the wind did the rest. Not until they were well alight did we see the horsemen who were really racing the flames and not coming through them. That's so, isn't it, Denton?"

Alan nodded. "Yes. We were coming up a track below the level of the hill parallel with the dyke. Of course we couldn't see you or any of your policemen because they were the other side of the hill, but the flames frightened the horses and as we'd made up our minds to get into the house somehow we all turned and came down the hill as fast as we could, and tried to calm the horses down in the dyke. How did you get the gates open, by the way? Did you knock or ring?"

Mr Cantor smiled specially at Dickie.

"Dickie doesn't realize it, but I shot the lock out. I couldn't wait... And now, thank you to Mrs Denton for her hospitality, and thank you to my new friends for helping me to do my job."

All the Lone Piners were yawning now and were too weary to realize the full significance of what they had heard. It was just as Agnes pushed back her chair that there came a thunder of knocks on the outside door. When David glanced up in surprise he saw Mr Cantor look hurriedly at the watch on his wrist. Then he caught David's eye and winked as the door opened to admit the large policeman from Clun.

"Sorry I am to break up this handsome party, but I'm to ask if there are in this house twins of the name of Morton?"

"And what would you be wanting with those poor innocents?" demanded Agnes.

"Innocents?" said the policeman, "That's as may be. I've come to take 'em away."

Dickie gave a whoop of joy.

"Mary, we're going to prison... This policeman has come to arrest us."

Mary shook her head sleepily.

"Say that again, twin. It sounded stupid to me... It sounded as if you said someone had come to arrest us."

"So I did. So he has. There he is."

"Don't be silly, twin. There's only one policeman in the world I'd let arrest me and that's my lovely Mr Cantor. He's the king of all policemen."

Here the Clun policeman guffawed loudly and then pretended to have a bad cough as his superior officer looked at him coldly.

"What shall I be doing about the car, then, sir?" he said.

"No need to do anything. We'll be out in a few minutes, thank you." He turned to the twins. "He has come to fetch you though. You've helped the police, so they've sent a big car to fetch you... I'll do my best to arrest you another time, Dickie."

At this the party began to break up and there was great confusion while everybody began to thank everybody else before trooping out into the dark where the two cars were waiting in the yard.

"Don't worry about Sally, Peter," Alan said as he walked over with her. "I'll take care of her tonight. And thanks again for all you've done, Peter. You've helped us no end and we shan't forget."

Then the twins managed to separate themselves from Agnes and when, at the top of the hill into Clun, they passed a caravan swaying down the road in the dark, Mary asked the friendly policeman who was driving to stop.

"We'll walk the rest, thank you very much," she said, and then turned and shook Jenny in the corner. "Wake up! We've just passed Reuben's caravan."

Meanwhile Dickie had jumped out into the road and stopped the other car which was carrying Agnes and the rest of the Lone Piners. The housekeeper's protests were in vain for the twins refused to go on until they had spoken to the gipsies.

There was then such a chattering that Miranda asked them to be quieter and not to wake Fenella. Reuben beckoned the twins and lifted them up beside him on the driving seat.

"Take the reins," he smiled, "one each, and drive in to Clun."

The Lone Piners walked down the hill beside the caravan like a guard of honour. The oil lamps on the front gleamed like the golden eyes of a sleepy animal and the little chimney sent out a plume of smoke.

"Snow soon," Reuben said as he stopped on the other side of the bridge and helped the twins down. "Farewell, my lucky ones. We shall meet again!"

"Good-bye!" they all called, "Good-bye."

Back at Keep View they found Mr Cantor waiting to say his good-bye. Then the twins were hustled off to bed and Mackie followed them as Penny said, "Let's go up to the Castle just for a few minutes and finish the adventure where it began."

"Moon should be up in a few minutes," Jon said as they toiled up the slope, "and here comes the snow."

They leaned against the rough walls and watched the moon break between the heavy clouds. Clun, but for a few lighted windows, seemed already asleep.

"It's all been far more wonderful than I thought it could," Penny said at last, "and that's thanks to you all."

"I didn't think a holiday could be so exciting," Peter said quietly. "It's the best I've ever had," and smiled at her new friend.

Jenny shivered and held her hands out to the falling snowflakes. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before."

"Look, everyone!" Tom suddenly called, "Doesn't he remind you of Witchend?"

He pointed upwards and they saw a big owl drift soundlessly by, above the ruined castle.

"Too-whit! Toooo-whit," Tom called, and the dusky shadow answered him as they all ran down the hill.